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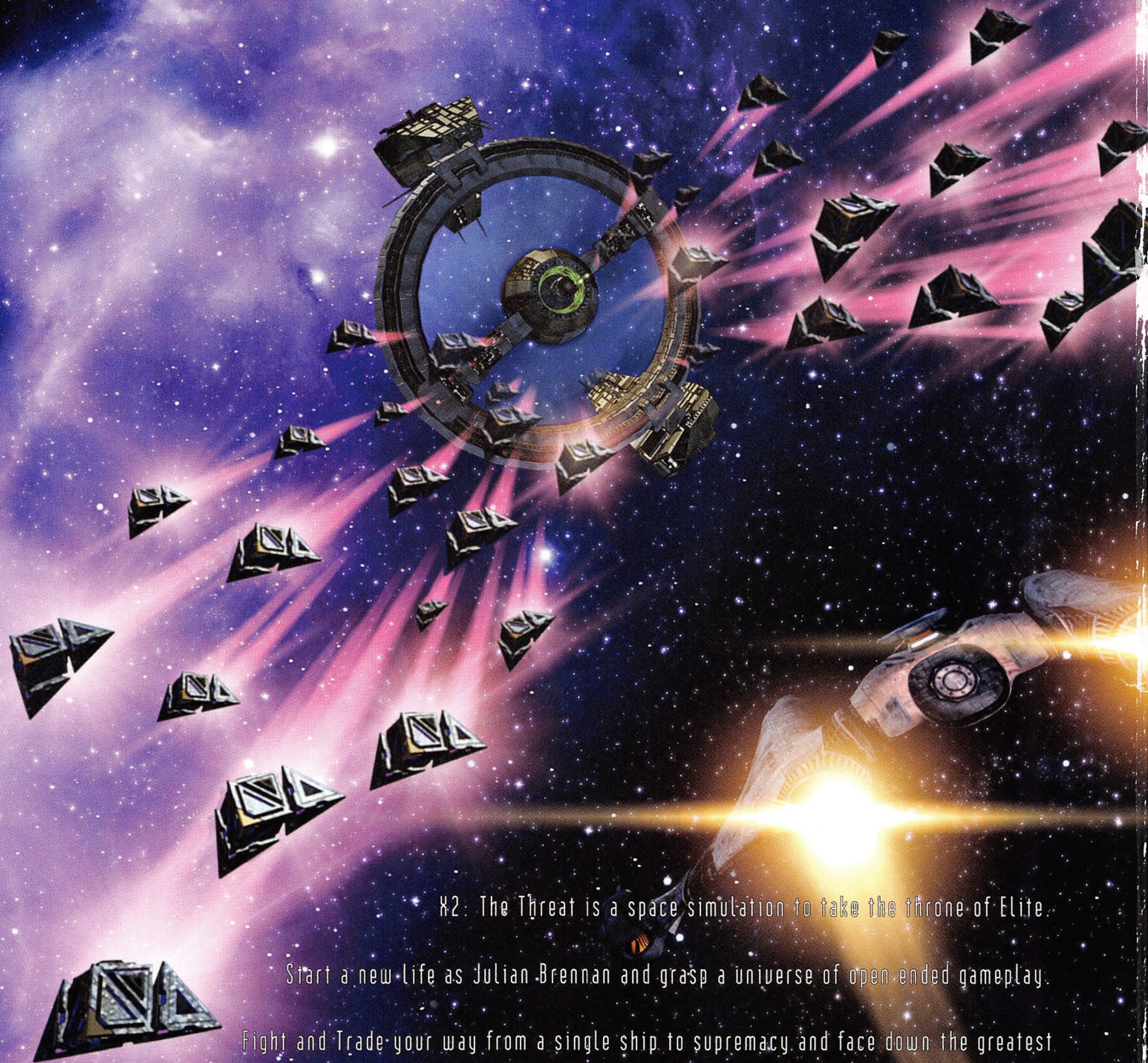
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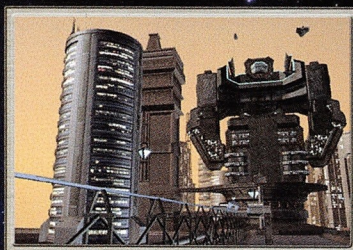
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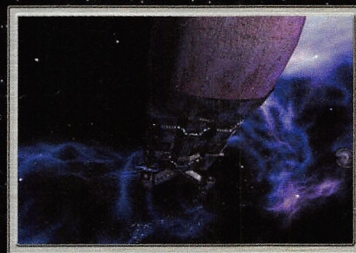
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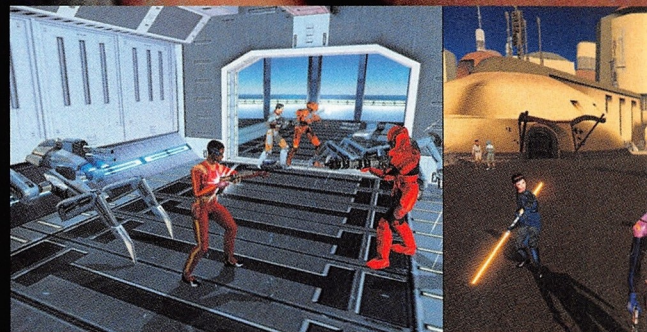




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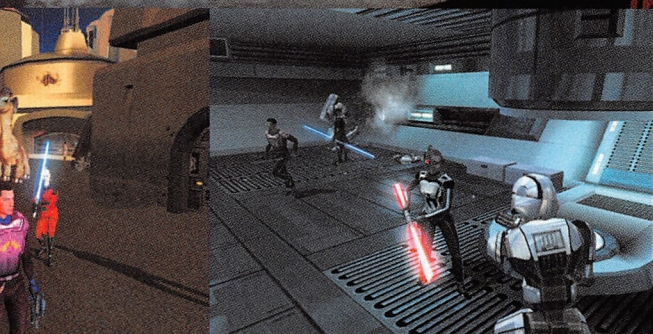
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64 odd bits of Grunt



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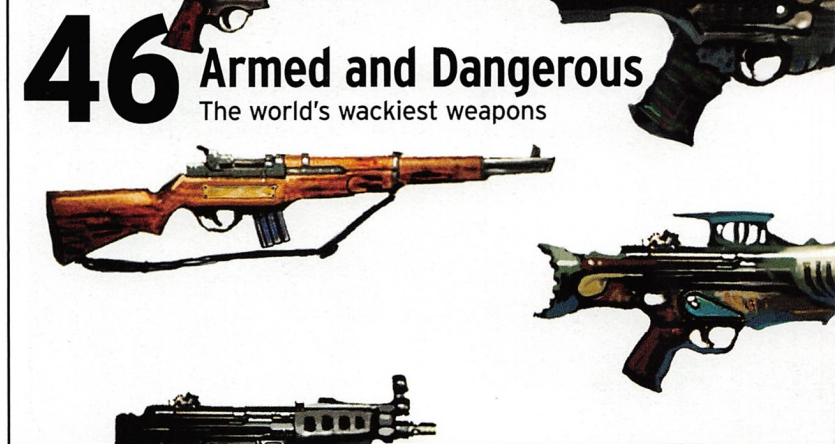
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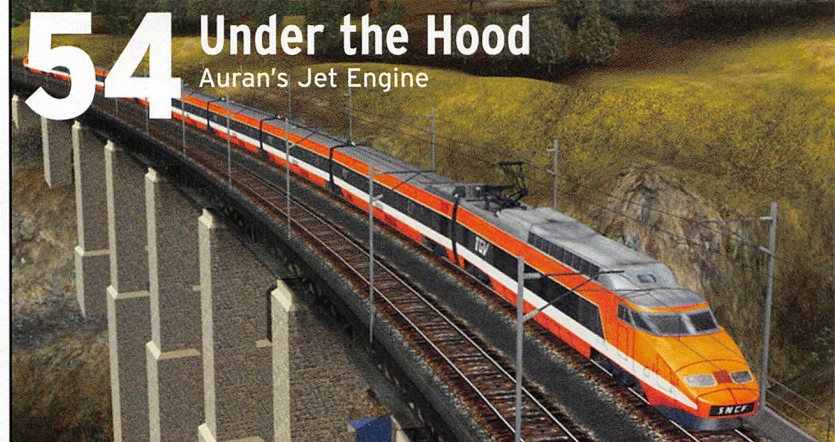
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Auran's Jet Engine





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## Xmas cheer?

You've gotta love Christmas. We seem to spend all year wondering where all the good games are and scrambling frantically to fill the review pages with... something... anything! Then along comes the merry months of November and December when every publisher under the sun decides to release a billion games each. Every day.

This issue proudly boasts our largest game review section of the entire year. Over 30 pages of critique and praise, in fact. It's been so chaotic round the office we haven't had the time nor the pages to review everything. So next issue will see the remaining dregs of the pre-Christmas deluge rounded up and rated within these very pages.

As you've probably already noticed, there's a Christmas present for everyone on the coverdisc. Whether you're a purchaser of the DVD or CD edition, you'll find a disc containing the full version of Age of Empires inside the plastic case strapped to the cover. If you enjoy Ensemble initial foray into historical real-time strategy, why not check out their Age of Mythology expansion, The Titans. Microsoft is offering PCPP readers a very special cash back offer for anyone who sends in their proof of purchase. It's a good game, too, as our Distinction badge testifies.

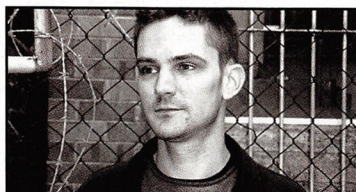
We've also been thinking about next year a fair bit here at PCPP HQ. One of the biggest titles due for release in the early months of 2004 is undoubtedly DOOM 3. It's curious that, quite unlike any previous id Software title, the DOOM remake has been the subject of much skepticism and even cynicism from some quarters of the gaming community. It's not revolutionary. It's just a corridor shooter. It's only got four-player online support. It's, well, all of these things. DOOM 3



may not be shifting paradigms and busting genres, but it may well end up delivering a superbly crafted and thrilling, seat of the pants experience. From page 36, we ask id's Tim Willits, Todd Hollenshead and Robert Duffy if that's really enough to satisfy the modern PC gamer. We'd like to know what you think of their case for the defence.

**David Wildgoose,**  
Editor  
davidw@next.com.au

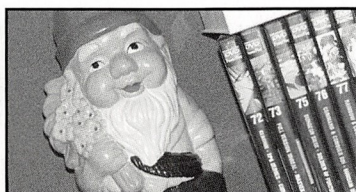
### The ones to blame:



**David Wildgoose**  
EDITOR

"If you don't like the DX2 demo, you're an idiot"

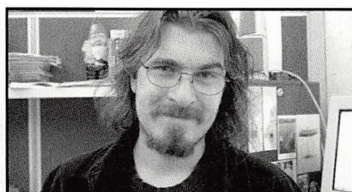
Playing: Invisible War



**STUART CALVIN**  
SENIOR WRITER

"I'm not a dwarf!"

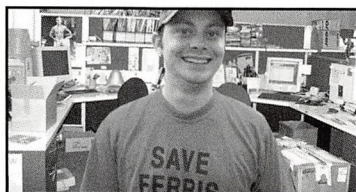
Playing: with our minds



**Daniel Wilks**  
SENIOR WRITER

"Don't call me hirsute"

Playing: KOTOR



**Bennett Ring**  
DEPUTY EDITOR

"Let's dance"

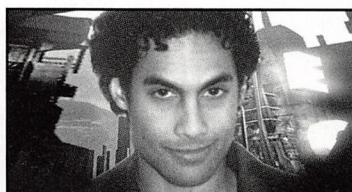
Playing: Gotham 2



**Ruth Barbato**  
ART DIRECTOR

"Beauty is in the eye of the beer holder"

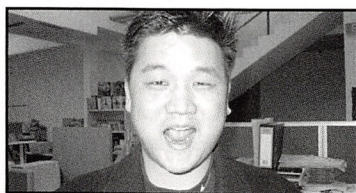
Playing: Call of Duty



**Timothy C. Best**  
SENIOR WRITER

"Judge Dredd, eh? Oops..."

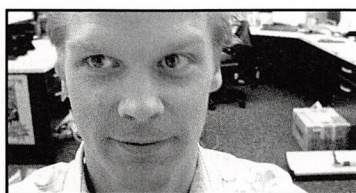
Playing: with levers in Uru



**Amos Hong**  
DISC EDITOR

"Congratulations, Guy!"

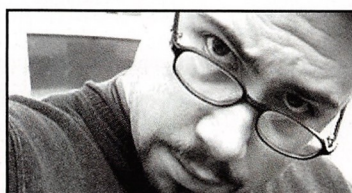
Playing: Pop Idol



**Joel Graham**  
ADVERTISING MANAGER

"Good work, champ!"

Playing: Halo. Again.



**Anthony Fordham**  
SENIOR WRITER

"Has the DX2 review code arrived yet?"

Playing: Not bloody DX2

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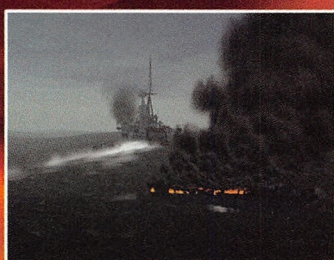


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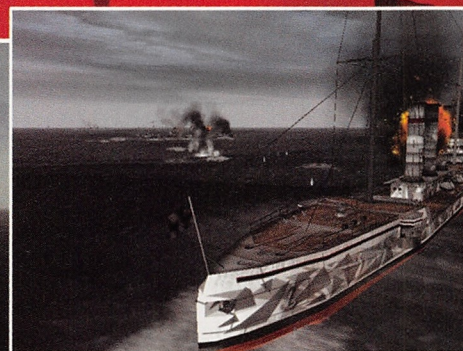
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## ENIGMA: RISING TIDE

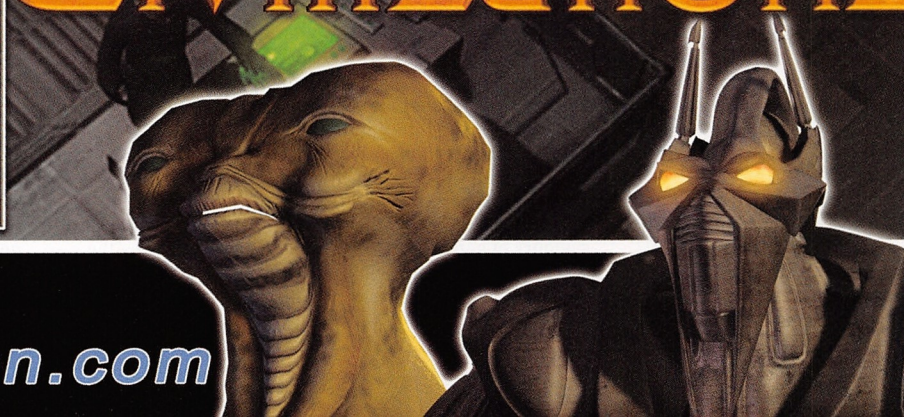
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# INBOX

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## HEROES

Atari is offering a free Heroes game to the author of every letter published in Inbox! This month's game is **Commandos 2**!



After PCPP#93 I have to say you guys have balls. Not in a courageous way but rather in the stupid, I don't get it, way. Brad Wohlers Thanks.



## BLAZING STREAKS

Can it be true? Are there PCPP readers out there who say "what?" when the hallowed game Total Annihilation is mentioned? Have the staff of PCPP really forgotten the greatness of one of gaming's pinnacles of strategy goodness? When was the last time you played a four-player LAN strategy that lasted for six hours, with awesome walls of defence against which was thrown many hundreds of bots, tanks and planes to be mown down ruthlessly by blazing streaks of lasers and canons, until eventually a cloaked sneak main attack of Warhammers & Kryptors from the side, after a feint at the other side, breaks through at last and you are into their homeland, blowing away factories and Alien Particle accelerators with joy? This is TA (well, with the TAUIP mod, and 500 unit mod). Oliver Dunne's letter to PCPP#93 summed up exactly my feelings as I glanced through the Top 100 list. No TA in the Top 100! Atrocity indeed. Methinks the PCPP staff need to revisit the roots of RTS gaming goodness.

Kris Jacques

Whoops. Yeah, you got us. The omission of TA from our Top 100 was a glaring oversight. The staff member responsible has been chained to his desk and forced to complete Mission Humanity as punishment.

## LOOSE PAGES

Great mag, but the last issue fell apart in my hands before I even made it through my first "skim-thru". Any chance of a replacement copy? I would much rather read it without having to sort through all the loose pages to find the next bit.

Jason Strang

Damn printers!

## CRAPTASTIC I

I'm a subscriber (PCPP ownz!) and a huge Deus Ex fan, so it was with great joy that I tore the plastic covering off PCPP#93 and flipped to the Ion Storm interview. After reading it several times, I have decided that we need more people like Warren Spector, and more teams like the Ion Storm crew. Not only are they responsible for Deus Ex, but Mr Spector stated quite clearly stated that he likes to take risks and explore new territory in game design, which I think is fantastic. With Christmas coming around all those games that looked great are now in our hands, and, to be honest, some of them are crappy, generic rip-offs, spin-offs, and cash rakers, adhering to tried and true formulae. In the middle of this Ion Storm seems like a beacon of light in a sea of mediocrity, the saviours of gaming. Warren Spector is a visionary, in many ways a

genius, and the man I believe is a true gaming god. As someone who lives in a remote area and has a craptastic Internet connection, his comments regarding NPCs nearly brought me - a hardcore geek - to tears of happiness. "I don't want to fall back onto the industry standard and make everything multiplayer...I want to create deep and involving singleplayer games." Ion Storm is a godsend for gamers, their games are revolutionary, their ideas are spectacular and, most importantly, they don't seem to be afraid of a game failing, so therefore don't go back to the old 'Unreal 2' method.

Venom

We love Warren, too. We have a photo of Warren and us on our desk. If we were girls, we would have his babies by now.



## BEAT THE DAILY

Just got PCPP#93 (great mag: gotta luv it) and read Tim's Best's column and I think I have a great idea for Kuma games new War game, since it looks like their gonna have trouble making it exciting and all. See instead of playing American soliders we could be remnant Iraqi militia and fanatics. Think about it, it'll be great: levels full of enemies in overwhelming numbers, lots of sneaking around (people luv the stealth these days), and even the occasional sniper action! Missions could be based

around trying to equal or beat the daily casualty report set by the real Iraqis. In fact, for added realism, they could take digital photos of recently killed soldiers and put 'em on the skins of the models in the game: with bonus points for killing them in the same manner as they died! (Wow, talk about realistic body damage!). Yeah I think it'll be grouse, games based around the suffering of specific real life individuals is exactly what we need to make the world a better place.

Red Rover

A valid argument there, Red, but what's the difference between Kuma War and, say, Call of Duty or Conflict Desert Storm? When does it become okay to depict one conflict but not another? Oh, and for the humour-impaired: yes, he is joking.

## TWICE MENTIONED HOTTIE

I dunno if this is just a coincidence or if you guys published this letter wondering who would spot it, but the current issue (PCPP#93) has a letter from one Ben Giadouris where he is wondering about females playing computer games. In particular, he makes mention of Jenna Jameson. Now if you'll turn to page 85 there is a review of Tony Hawk's 4, with a box-out saying that you can unlock a skater voiced by Jenna Jameson. Now I don't know what's going on here, but if she looks anything the twice mentioned hottie, I may need to play TH4 (even though I'm not done with TH3 yet). Now I've had a brain storm! If no one else has spotted this, maybe you need to send me a copy?

Karlos Gajewski

It's obvious isn't it? We're part of a global conspiracy to turn computer geeks into, well, porn-obsessed computer geeks. It appears to be working rather nicely...

## ?????????

I am writing to you (Really? - Ed) concerning the section in your mag where you have put together the Beastie, Mutant and so-called Beast. If it's meant to be a Beast it should have the best of everything, for example, the speakers are good but there are much better speakers out there (Sorry about that - Ed). If it's meant to be a Beast then make it a Beast! It's not meant to be a budget system (Yeah, sorry - Ed). Another example is the case. You state in the article that it may not be the Rolls Royce of cases, but the Beast you should have the best case money can buy (Please accept our apologies - Ed). That should also go for everything else (Again with the sorry - Ed). Anyway, love your mag, keep up the good work (Uh, okay, I take it all back, too! - Ed).

Yehudah Woolstone

## REGARDS, SAM LAKE

As I'm sure you guys know, Max Payne 2 is being released quite soon and I must say I'm really looking forward to it. It will be a game that I purchase as I believe the developer has put in a lot of effort in to it. Although my mate doesn't think so, he somehow got his hands on a dirty copy three weeks before the Australian release date and was giving me shit about how I had to buy it and he didn't (and the



fact that I had to wait three weeks to get it). So of course I had to do something about this dodgy pirating scum. I told him that Max Payne 2 had some unique activation procedure and detects if a copied version has been installed by notifying Remedy using the internet. Now this mate likes games but isn't that great with computers and didn't really believe me. This was until I spoofed an email looking like it came from Remedy saying:

*"Dear Sir,  
We have detected an illegal copy of one of our software titles on your computer and therefore must take the appropriate action. Unless you comply and uninstall the pirated software immediately we will be forced to take legal action and you will be prosecuted to the full extent of the law."*

*Regards,  
Sam Lake"*

Now he thought this email was legit and shat himself completely. I can tell you right now he uninstalled the game so fast and threw away is copy on CD that he really believed he would get fined like \$200k. The next day I saw him down at the local EB putting his \$10 on the Max Payne 2 preorder, and that's the way it should be.

Matthew Eason

*Good work, Matthew. May dodgy pirating scum never feel safe in their beds.*

## A RAT'S ARSE

In PCPP#93, Patrick Lay wrote that Warcraft III had a "kick arse story line." I think it was good but not kick arse. I'll agree that C&C Generals' campaign was frightfully repetitive and somewhat predictable, but I honestly think that being



both a mean Warcraft III and Generals player, Generals multiplayer offers far more strategic options

## FROM THE FORUMS

### Subject: RIP Mucky Foot

Ok, here's what you need to do. Examine your pc games collection. If your game collection doesn't contain Startopia, ask a good friend to kick your sorry ass. I'd do house calls and kick your ass for you, but I'm only one man. **Veefy, Dire Monkey**

A moments silence please. **Ubernappa, Skaarj**

One of the saddest company close downs was when Looking Glass, the makers of the "greatest ever series" Thief, had to close due to money problems.

**Firestorm, Cacodemon**

The Origin wake touched me. Especially when one of the original Wing Commander designers threw the huge pile of documents from the design crew into the big fire they had with all the other stuff. Considering they were my favourite company and at the time I

was totally nuts about Ultima, I felt sad to know that the best company was being screwed over by EA. I still have all the Ultimas and I still love all the other games OSI have made, especially Wing Comannder.

**DyNaMix, Guardian**

In related great-game-companies-closing news, Microprose have shut down. The games might become lost in a sea of memories and the constant wash of an escalating technology, but the manuals will always be there to take up space (and dust) on our bookshelves.

**EEVIAC, Skaarj**

**Subject: Last game to give you an all-nighter**  
Mine was KOTOR, Friday (not a real all-nighter) finished about 5:30, Saturday.

**Charhate, MIB**

Wing Commander 1 back on my 286. Played it for

probably 17 hours straight. I was only like 10 at the time as well I think. Brilliant fun.

**DyNaMiX, Guardian**

Gunbound. It's a crappy free online multiplayer game with pretty good graphics. The gameplay is similar to the good old classic "Scorched Earth". Has a cute type anime look to it. It's made in Korea.

**Wile E., Templar**

Neverwinter Nights co-op with my friend. I accidentally pissed off a guard, due to my constant stabbing or arrows in his back. Eventually, he started chasing me through a library. Because it was top down, it was one of the funniest things I've ever seen, while my friend sat in the same spot moving his character as if he watching. All the while I'm yelling: "Get 'im off! Get 'im off! Get 'im off!"

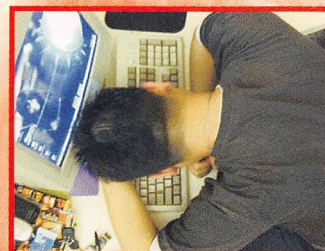
### Forum Guy, Pit Drone

The first time I ran through Torment, I think I did the last half of the game in one session that went pretty much all night. I mean with other RPGs, sure you have long sessions, but I've never had that feeling of must-find-out-happened-to-him before or since. It was like reading LOTR the first time, I just stayed up devouring the story till my eyes closed of their own accord.

**Grishnahk, Great Claw**

NEVER!!! Sleep is way more precious than gaming.

**Chompy2, Jedi**



than Warcraft III, even more so now with the release of the expansion pack Zero Hour (who's campaign was unfortunately once again, shall we say crap).

I think we are starting to see a new tide of games where the developer couldn't give a rat's arse whether the campaign is good as long as the multiplayer is. Someone please save us with a copy of Half-Life 2.

David Bradbury

*Nice segue into Half-Life 2, btw.*

## STEAL A FRIDGE

A few months ago I read an article from your Yellow Boots about how to cool a computer. I've had my own problems in cooling mine, until a few of my friends gave me inspiration.

They were talking about modified computer casings, claiming that someone had made one out of a shoe box, when it hit me: why not make a case out of a fridge?

There would be plenty of room for the hardware, the weight would make it difficult to steal (and who would want to steal a fridge anyway?), and there would be no cooling problem, since that's what fridges do all day. For really high performance machines, there maybe too much heat, so use a freezer. Also, there will probably be extra room, so you could store a week's supply of beer...

Andrew Cooper

*Bennett's working on the tutorial right now.*



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# Insight

## PATIENCE GRASSHOPPER

ATI forges ahead

Bennett Ring



With the release of the 9800XT, as reviewed in this issue of PCPP, ATI have once again taken a rather large performance trout and slapped it repeatedly across the chops of NVIDIA. It's the fastest video card available to gamers, churning through DX9 games with ease, and yet we still don't recommend purchasing it. Huh?

Sure, if you're the kind of gamer who purchases a new video card every couple of months with the slush fund set up by your oil prospecting uncle, go for it. But for the rest of us, we've got some information that will make you think twice about laying out a cool

\$800 or so on one of these babies.

We recently had a meeting with ATI, where we were privy to some rather exciting information about their next generation of products. How does a video card that's going to perform approximately TWICE as fast as the 9800 sound to you? It's codenamed the R423, and is due out in March of next year. However, you're going to need a new motherboard to run it, as this speed demon is utilising the new PCI Express design, which will replace the PCI and AGP slots seen on current motherboards. Unlike the insignificant performance increases between various speeds of AGP (2X, 4X and 8X), ATI

assured us that PCI-X will bring a tangible performance increase to graphics performance. Fear not though, as an AGP version will also be available, the R420, and although ATI couldn't give us any information on the performance levels of this chipset we're pretty sure it'll give the R423 a good run for its money.

The medium range is almost as exciting, with the RV380 chipset offering performance levels around 25% faster than the 9800. That's pretty astonishing performance when you consider these cards will sell around the \$400 price point.

But what we're really interested in is NVIDIA's answer to these new

ATI chipsets. NVIDIA obviously realise they dropped the ball with the 5900 series of video cards, so will no doubt be putting a lot of work into their next series of chipsets to regain the performance crown. We contacted NVIDIA to find out about their next line of chipsets - unfortunately they were unable to supply any information at all; no performance specs, no chipset details, nothing at all. This either means they've got something really special up their sleeves, or they're scrambling for cover. Let's hope it's the former, not the latter.



# HOME OF SECOND CHANCES?

## Romero and Hall Go Midway

Timothy C. Best

Well known PC game designers John Romero and Tom Hall have announced that they are joining Midway's development team. This is an interesting move because Midway has never been known for powerhouse PC design, being best known for arcade games like *Mortal Kombat* and its sports titles.

It's made more interesting but Romero and Hall's track record. They were core members during the early days of id software and helped forge *Doom* and *Quake*. They went on to work for a studio called Ion Storm where they were given lots of money with the expectations of huge returns. While Hall's game *Anachronox* delivered a pretty fine sci-fi RPG, Romero's *Daikatana* (and his rock-star handling of his side of the studio) crashed and burned in a gaming-folklore kind of way.

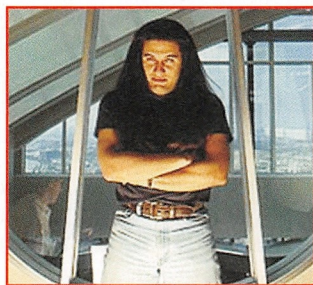
After this, the pair created a company called MonkeyStone to develop small-scale games for mobile devices like PDAs.

Midway has also seen better days. The struggling game co is caught in class action legal woes after it was alleged that Midway fiddled with business figures to artificially boost the price of their stock. On top of that, it has been hemorrhaging cash with the latest quarter showing a \$US24.1 million net loss.

Something has to give, and it looks like Midway's brand new CEO David Zucker has decided to roll the dice. A struggling game co could be the perfect place for Romero to redeem himself. There can't be claims of any excesses in a place like that. It'll all have to come down to clever design.

Romero was obviously looking to get back into 3D and Zucker knows that he will be motivated because it's make or break for him. What's more, after his *Icarus* routine, he fell

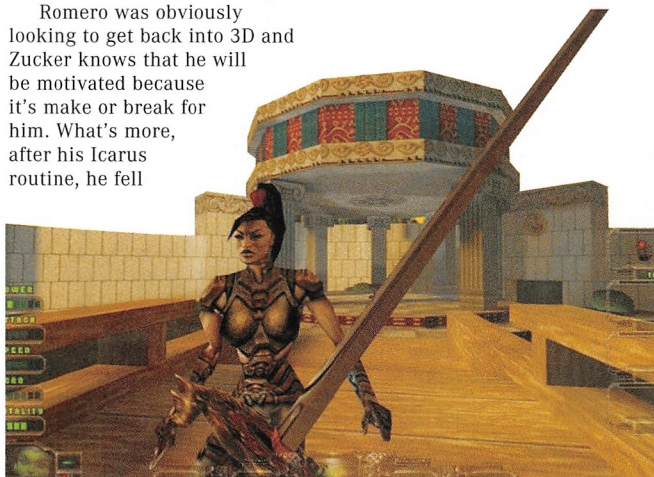
squarely into Midway's price range. Hall, on the other hand, is obviously used to working with Romero and his reputation makes them a lot less of a gamble. Insiders point to a re-vamped *Gauntlet* as their first project and the combination of experience and a well-loved title could be just what Midway and Romero need.



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# OUT OF THE COLD

## Flagship Studios Formed

Timothy C. Best

What happens when your games studio gets too big and successful? The answer is simple: you start over. That's the thinking behind Flagship Studios, founded by these five executives formerly of Blizzard North: David Brevik, Max Schaefer, Erich Schaefer, Bill Roper and Kenneth Williams.

Brevik was the president, Williams was the director of business and the other three were all vice presidents – so this new ship has a lot of top brass. Other co-founders include key artists from the Diablo series (two lead, one background and one character), plus two senior programmers. Between them, the crew has experience on all of Blizzard's smash hit franchises including Warcraft, Starcraft and, especially, Diablo.

With five projects on the boil at Blizzard North, it's no wonder that the senior crew felt a little distant from actually making games. Sometimes, you know it's just time

to get back to basics and the team departed Blizzard so suddenly that it actually had to leave mobile numbers in some press releases so people could find them under their new name. It seems that everything is full steam ahead and there have been plenty of bites from publishers who have managed to sneak a peak at the initial designs of Flagship's first offering.

The project's title hasn't been announced, but a single piece of art is making the rounds, which suggests that the guys have something particular, and particularly fantasy, in mind. Bill Roper has shed a pin-prick of light in various interviews saying that the game will be dark, won't be your classic fantasy concept, won't be a sports title and it won't be set somewhere we've never heard of.

We'll keep you up to date on this 'flagship' title as details are released. Will it be smooth sailing? We'll keep you posted.



## NEW STATE OF FUNDING

### Slap Your Sugar Daddy

Timothy C. Best



Scottish developer VIS has just released details on how it plans to fund its next game and its model could change the way the industry is structured.

Usually, getting a game funded is a bit weird. Generally you can try to get venture capital companies to invest in your studio, like any new company, or you can go to a publisher and try to get them to pick up your game. If they decide to get on board, the publisher gets to set deadlines, have a voice in development and take lots of the profits.

What VIS has done sort of sits between these two options. It's created a company just to act as a backer for its next game.

Now investors (rather than just a publisher) can back a particular project instead of the studio itself. This is appealing in the case of VIS because, while the company doesn't have a reputation of producing hit

after hit, State of Emergency did very well, meaning that State of Emergency 2 is likely to be a pretty safe bet. Sometimes you're willing to bet on a studio because it has all the talent in the world; other times it's the idea that's worth a million. Giving the investors choice has got to be a good thing.

If it works it could signal that our industry is maturing in two ways. Firstly, by making it easier to invest in games and secondly, by showing that people take the industry seriously enough to do so. What's more, not having to go through the same select group of major publishers to get a game approved and off the ground, innovation could flourish.

But before you get too excited, keep in mind this idea is similar to the movie funding model and it looks like Rocky 6 is on its way...



# N-GAGE SCOUTING THE WAY

## Mobile Nokia Pocket Rocket

Timothy C. Best

Nokia has announced a new line of phones that blur the lines of handheld game, pocket PC and phone even further.

The flagship model of the "media handset", the 7700, looks like a game console but has a 640x320 resolution touch screen

(pen input welcomed) which boasts 65,000 colours. It also has a built-in camera, has full web access through the Opera browser, and can get TV and radio via IP data casting. This thing comes with 64Mb of internal memory and has an expansion slot for more.

Naturally, it also plays MP3s and MPEG-4 movies, gets email, has a

word processor, is Java enabled, and is an organiser as well as taking calls. The new line also includes the 6820 and 6810 both of which come with a flip out QWERTY keyboard for all of your typing needs.

It's obvious that Nokia has some long term goals because it wouldn't have followed through with these handsets so quickly based on the limited success of the N-Gage, that's for sure.

In the same way that the N-Gage says that Nokia isn't afraid to go up against the all-conquering Game Boy, the feature set of this line is a definite, and deliberate, challenge to the next generation of Pocket PCs.

With the keyboard and the web connectivity, it looks like phones will be the next must-have upgrade for online (MMO) gaming. This phone with its PC leanings and larger screen is really begging for it. While the graphics cards might

not be up for the visuals your PC will pump out, and it would cost too much for eight-hour gaming stints, but imagine how cool it would be to log into EverQuest and sell all of your loot at the Bazaar or finish your crafting on the bus on the way home, so that as soon as you get there you're ready to hit the wilds once more.

It's fascinating to note that for years the handheld industry never really made a bid for the mass market but now telephones, of all things, are forcing the handheld PC market forward towards the critical mass where big-name game development starts becoming really attractive.



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# LEISURE SUIT LARRY

## The Next Generation

Timothy C. Best



In the late 80s one man was known for his charm and way with the women... that man was Leisure Suit Larry. Now the series returns in the form of Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude.

Apparently the success of movies like *There's Something About Mary* and *American Pie* have inspired Sierra to revive the series that focuses on comical dating blunders and embarrassing moments. Since the teen thing is all the rage, this game features a young Larry, failing miserably to pick up chicks on the college scene.

When he hears about a reality TV dating game coming to his Community College, Larry decides to turn his life around and become the stud he's always wanted to be.

From the amount of trouble he gets into, it's safe to say he should have just gone to Band Camp.

The new game will be Larry's first move into 3D and it's looking like the developer, High Voltage, has combined sexy and dorky in

about the right teen-movie ratio. The weird thing is that there's no leisure suit in sight, the new game doesn't feature the Larry we know and loath – instead we get his nephew who is also happens to be named Larry – and, finally, the original creator of the series (Al Lowe) is sitting out on this dance.

This game raises a lot of revisiting-the-past concerns. Larry was always the sleazy loser with lines that are older than linoleum. Teen-loser Larry is going to take some time to get used to. Beyond that, one wonders how Stifler/Stiller humour will translate into a computer game, especially since any hint of dodgy sexual content – in these days of wondrous graphics and panic – causes US action groups to lose their minds. I hope the game lets players bonk pies... that would go down well. We'll have to wait until next year to see just how far Larry goes.

# FADING AWAY

## Taste of Piracy

Timothy C. Best

Fade is copy protection on the sly. The idea behind it isn't to nail wrong-doers but to give them a taste of the game and then slowly take it away from them, hopefully leaving them a hankering for more.

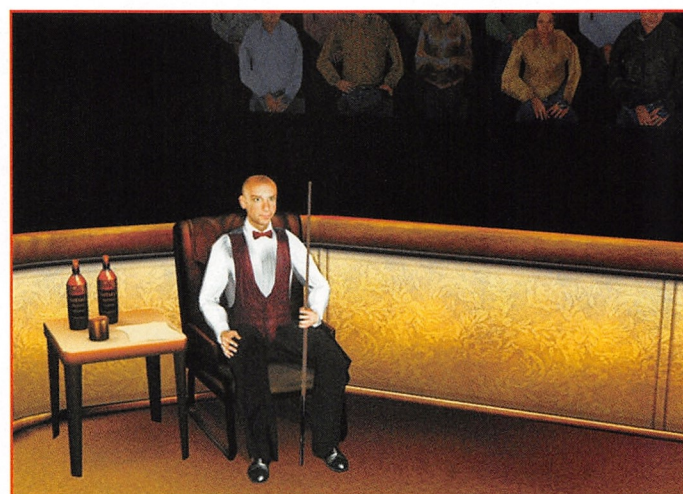
In Codemasters's new snooker game, for example, pirated discs will tick along nicely for a set number of shots and then the in-game physics start to wander. First, the balls will bounce off each in slightly odd ways, and then things get more pronounced until they float off the table.

The way the game recognises legitimate game disks is also pretty neat. As *New Scientist* magazine reveals, Codemasters has hidden code throughout their game which looks like errors and scratches to the PC reading it. With modern, in-built error correction, these are

things that will be hard to convince your computer to copy correctly.

Piracy has been a huge problem for the games industry and it costs the publishers and developers billions of dollars. One of the problems is that the better your protection, the more you entice people to break it. Fade is elegant because it gives players a promotional taste, and because there's a time delay before you realise that you have a game with copy protection. The scheme is super sneaky because it attacks the consumer confidence in dodgy dealers and websites.

No one really wants to get a game, put in the time and effort to get somewhere, not to mention getting attached to their characters, only to discover that their saves are



filled with increasing weird and unplayable physics. The best way to make sure your progress won't be for naught is to get legit.

The software is being developed by UK games studio Codemasters with the help of a digital rights

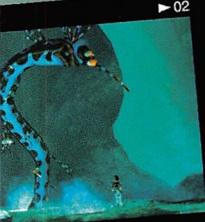
management company Macrovision and is soon set to debut in DVD movies. If you are watching a dodgy copy of your favourite movie and just as the axe falls it fades to black, you'll know who to thank..



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# Red Orchestra

For: UT 2003/2004 ■ Version: 1.11 ■ Size: 330MB ■ Rating: 4/5 ■ URL: [www.unrealwarfarex.com/redorchestra](http://www.unrealwarfarex.com/redorchestra)

It's not only Half-Life and Battlefield 1942 that are conquering the world of WWII online shooters. Although currently nowhere near as popular as Day of Defeat or BF 1942, Red Orchestra, a full conversion mod for UT 2003 (and soon UT 2004) sets the action in Europe's Eastern Front, pitting the forces of the Wehrmacht and Red Army against each other to determine the fate of the continent. It has the potential to give the others a definite run for their money for a number of reasons including some extremely good looks, well balanced weapons, hectic infantry combat and vehicle implementation come UT 2004 next year. Gameplay revolves around a hold and capture scenario much like that seen in BF 1942 and is well complemented by an excellent selection of well designed maps with just the right number of choke points to make things really interesting. One of the best features of the mod is the level of realism. Simple features such as having the player tire after running or jumping are far from new but are definitely welcome in a world of bunny hopping motherf\*\*\*\*s. Other additions to the realism include well-implemented iron sights and location specific damage and effects - get shot in the leg and you'll limp, get shot in the arm and your accuracy will decrease. As exciting as the current release of Red Orchestra is, the next release for UT 2004 will be better again with the inclusion of vehicles and a single player campaign.



## A word with R.M. BURLTON



When Modlife was first approached to cover the Ghost in the Machine mod for Deus Ex, we were told that it was one of the few DX TC mods that stood a chance of being completed. Ironically a few days after sending off an email interview we received words that the mod was undergoing some "changes". We feared the worst and expected the mod to disappear but instead the news is all good - rather than making a mod, the GitM crew has turned their hand to Machinima,

creating movies using game engines. Although no date has been set we definitely look forward to seeing the final product and maybe getting it on the cover disk. For more information cruise across to: [www.planetdeusex.com/gitm/](http://www.planetdeusex.com/gitm/)

### Why did you get into modding?

The main reason why I got into modding was I wanted to create a story that would be able to rival that of literature or film. Gaming seems to be an underrated medium, and not a lot of people see its full potential.

### Why did the team decide to go from making a mod to making a film using the game engine?

We decided to focus our work from making a mod to shooting a film mainly because of the limitations of the engine. When I started GitM a long time ago, I

was a one man crack-pot team doing everything myself, but the more I worked with the engine, the more I learned its limitations. By then it was too late, and I had a team of close to 20 under my command. The best decision I could come up with that would be a compromise to everyone, instead of cancelling or moving to another engine, was to combine my love of film, love of gaming, which is actually a lot easier, and a whole lot more fun.

### Will the imminent release of DX2 effect you in any way (i.e. any plans to move across to the new engine when it is released?)

Not at all. There are no plans for the DX2 SDK to be released, so there is nothing to compete with, and nothing to evolve to. Sure we could move to a newer engine, but that's over a year of hard work down the drain. I'd rather

complete something on a 3 or 4 year old engine than start anew. Besides, there is still a fairly decent sized community, and we all are very supportive of each other's projects.

### Why have you decided to work with the DX engine?

The reason for the DX engine was the conversation engine, and Deus Ex used a lot of generic models and would just re-skin them for each character. It was a no brainer, since originally the plan was to make an RPG with lots of different people, and now it's coming in handy too for those same reasons (maybe not the convo engine though).

### Any advice for up and coming modders?

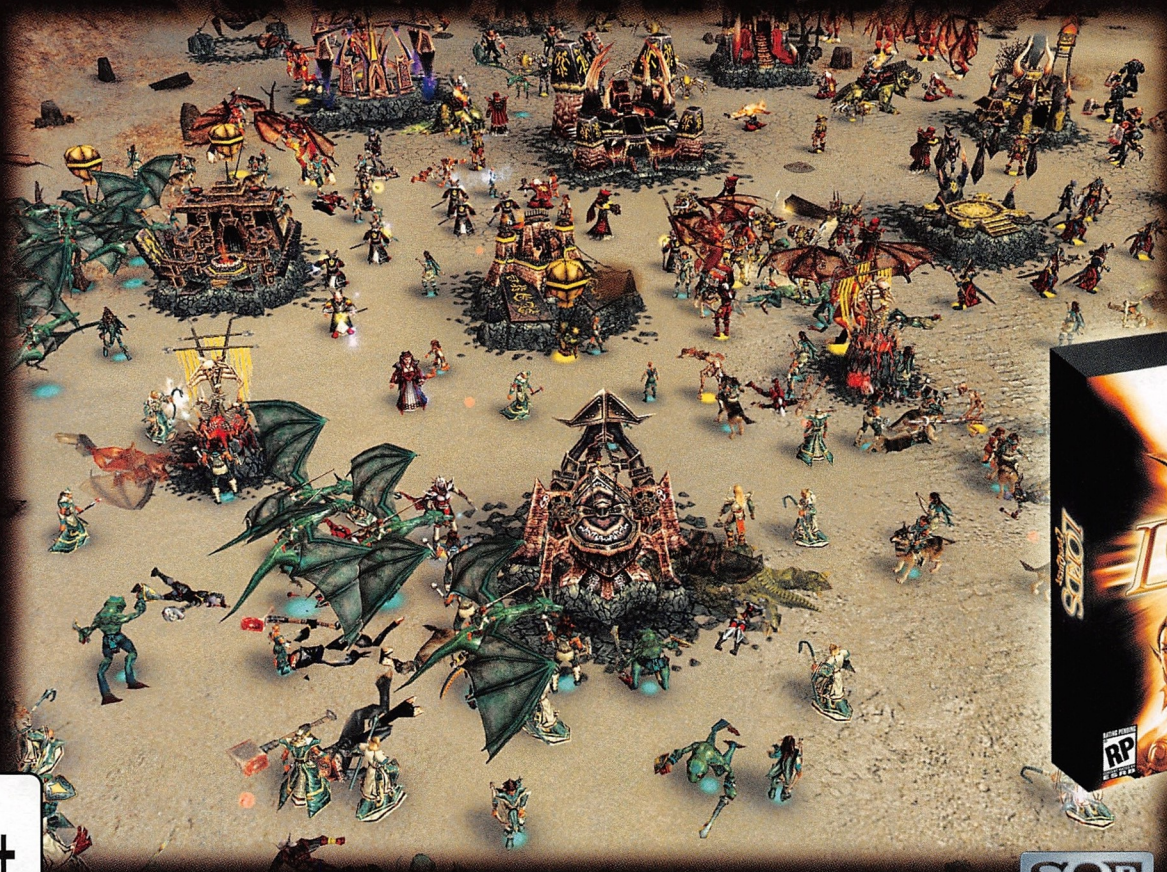
Learn one skill and learn it well. Also, before starting your own mod, try to join an existing mod, just to see if it's for you.



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- PC Powerplay October 2003

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# GARAGE GAMES

Into the unknown with George Soropos

## STRANGE ADVENTURES IN INFINITE SPACE

Developer: Digital Eel Genre: Space Strategy URL: [www.digital-eel.com/sais/](http://www.digital-eel.com/sais/)



Once upon a time there was a game genre called Space Strategy and it was good. Gamers would lock themselves away for days, building empires, upgrading technologies and doing their bit to improve Coca Cola Amatil's share price. Sadly something new and innovative happened which was going to make everything really good and so much better than before. It was called Online Gaming. Online Gaming introduced Space Strategy fans to the concept of speed, or rather the lack thereof, and soon their favourite genre became a graveyard of failed experiments, from Star Wars Rebellion to MOO3.

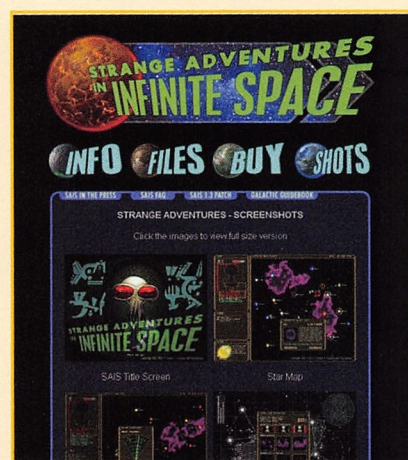
Enter Strange Adventures in Infinite Space, a game that claims to let you "Explore the Galaxy in 20 minute or less!" and known as

SAIS, for the sake of convenience. SAIS is the ultimate high speed space strategy game, a distillation of exploration, technology acquisition and starship combat gameplay for those of us who don't have the time to spend all weekend micromanaging our nuclear piles. It is a neat little satire of those 'orrible 'streamlined' Space Strategy titles that pulled the guts out of the genre, while at the same time being an interesting diversion between sandwich bites or business meetings.

Your mission is to boldly go where no cliché has gone before, encountering aliens, new worlds, new technologies while keeping an eye on the mission clock. Returning home on time is important for your points tally.

Each game is different thanks to the random galaxy generator and there are enough tech, ship and creature types to keep you interested for a while. The game is also made to be modded and includes a comprehensive modding guide along with the game manual. Some nice mods can be found in various places around the web, including: <http://groups.msn.com/SAISFederation/modcentral.msnw> and <http://www.csegames.net/index.htm>

So there you have it, if the idea of a Space Strategy game that you can finish in less time it takes you to download the latest



BF1942 mod appeals to you, some strange adventures are waiting for you.

### ONE-ON-ONE WITH DIGITAL EEL

Thanks to some fast talking on our editor's part we managed to get approval for the use of the official Next Media Anal Probe, bequeathed to us by a former advertising staff member, and somehow managed to get Rich Carlson (lead designer of SAIS) to agree to the insertion:

**PCPP: So what possessed you to develop a sub-20 minute Space Strategy title?**

Rich Carlson: The desire to create a game that people could play while their bosses think that they are working was foremost in our minds really. That and the desire to make lots of money, gain fame and notoriety and maybe marry a pop star.

**PCPP: SAIS was a finalist at the 2003 Independent Games Festival, how did you get involved in that and how has it affected your work?**

RC: The Festival is the best place to showcase your work if you are an indie developer as there are now so many people from the

mainstream part of the industry involved giving advice and the benefit of their experiences. Of course they are also 'scouting' for potentially commercial games and designers so it can work both ways, with the most talented people getting taken away and locked inside some cold grey room at Activision with a man in a lab coat and a swinging gold watch "You LIKE Tony Hawk, you WANT to make Tony Hawk 13, you ARE a gnarly dood"

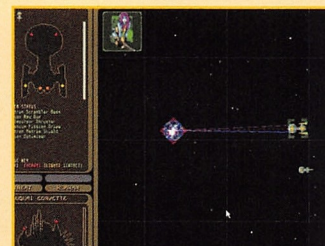
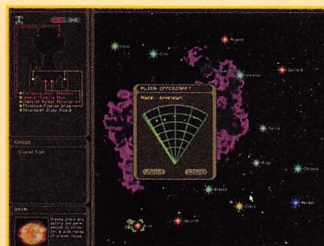
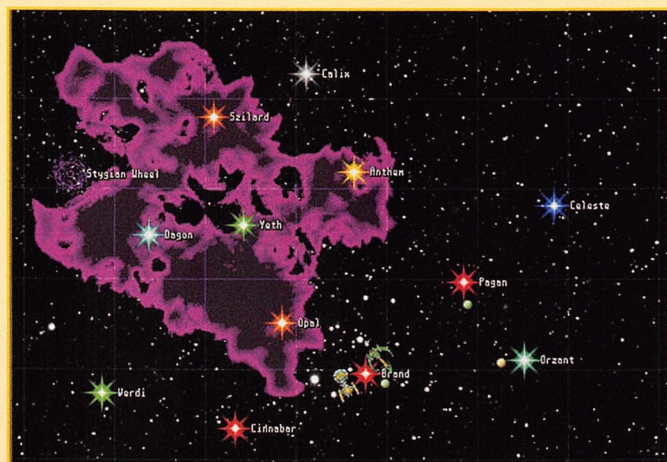
**PCPP: Is Digital Eel a full-time job for you or do you still need to support yourself with another career?**

RC: We are slowly building up to the point where we can sustain ourselves but we all still need some other money coming in, until we can build up our range of products some more. We have recently released a board game version of SAIS

which is doing quite well.

**PCPP: Do you have any plans to develop SAIS further or is it 'done'?**

RC: SAIS started life as a massive 7 screen game with over 200 planets, however that ended up being a bit impractical. There are some loose plans to use the SAIS engine to make a bigger, different sort of game but nothing is in the works as yet. SAIS is however easily moddable and some of our fans have already made some interesting additions to the game.





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THE BORINGLY NAMED

# COMPETITION PAGE!

WITH DIVINE PEARLS OF WISDOM



## WINNERS!

### PCPP#93 HALO

#### 1st Prize

Jesse Kupper, NSW  
Runners-up  
Boris Pupacic, NSW  
Ben Wynn, NSW  
Daniel Budden, NSW  
Tom Sidford, NSW  
Rosie Thewlis, SA

### PCPP#93 CHROME

Stewart Jaques, QLD  
Alex Jovanovich, WA  
Lui Kohl, NSW  
Peter Allen, SA  
Daniel Baker, ACT

### PCPP#93 SPACE COLONY

Diederik Japin, QLD  
Christopher Leben, VIC  
K Gabara, NSW  
S James, NSW  
W Loughed, QLD

### PCPP#93 HIDDEN & DANGEROUS 2

Boris Pupacic, NSW  
Jack Brew, VIC  
Jesse Kupper, NSW  
I C Turnbull, WA  
Mark Curan, NSW

### PCPP#93 CALL OF DUTY

Jarrold Maslin, NSW  
W G Bowyer, SA  
Michael Quandt, NSW  
Justin Kingaby, VIC

### PCPP#93 FIREWARRIOR

A Dunn, SA  
Howell Hector, WA  
Ben Fannen, VIC  
Nathan Burns, VIC

### PCPP#93 XIII

Brandt Cers, VIC  
Ben Colagrande, VIC  
Justin Morris, VIC  
Andrew Davenport, NSW  
W Loughed, QLD  
David Carroll, VIC

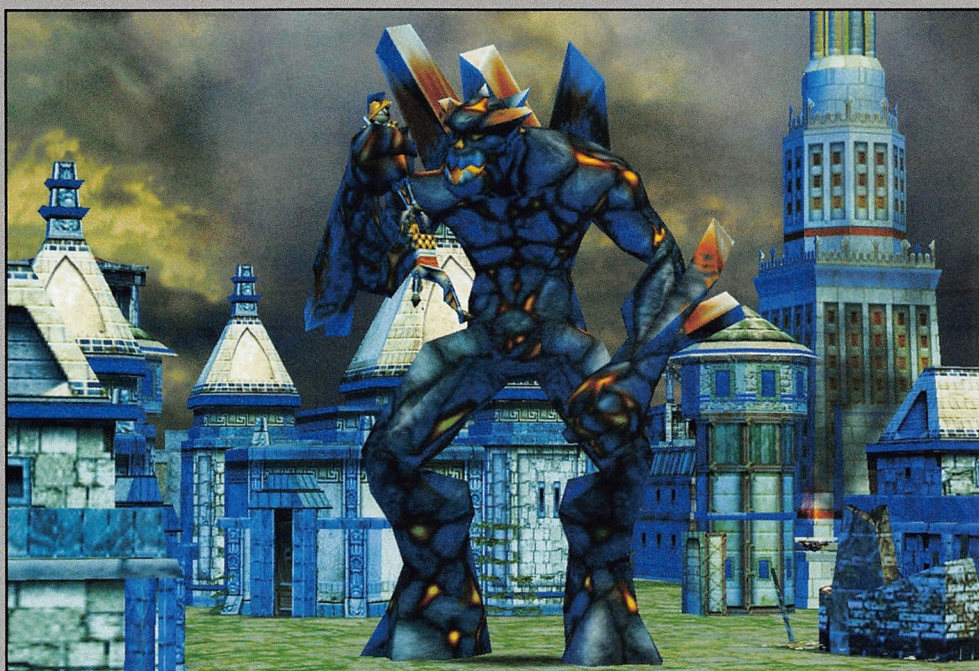


## LOSERS!

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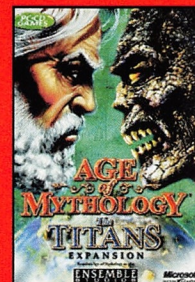
**Q. Age of Mythology designer Bruce Shelley once famously compared his games to which type of processed meat product?**

No It's Not Spam Comp  
PC PowerPlay  
78 Renwick St  
Redfern NSW 2016



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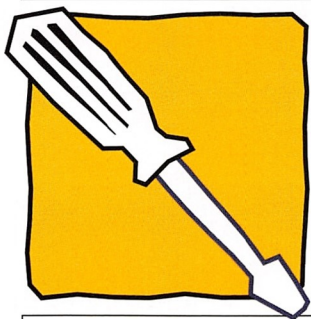
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# HOTWARE

All the bits that we cram in at the last moment with Anthony Fordham

## GAMEPARK GP32

**Price:** \$295 **Distributor:** Lik Sang **Contact:** [www.liksang.com](http://www.liksang.com)

Sort of a GBA for electronics geeks, the GP32 is arguably an over-powered under-supported handheld gaming alternative with a few awesome titles. It has wireless built in, plays MP3s and can be used as a text reader and image viewer. This version also has a front-light built in, like the GBA SP, although a non-front-lit version is also available at about \$50 cheaper. Most of the games for it are by obscure Korean companies and take the form of overwrought RPGs, but the graphics are

unfailingly sweet. However, it's the storage that really makes this machine interesting - it takes SmartMedia cards so with a USB reader, you can get a version of MAME for it. Thousands of classic games on a handheld? Yes please!



## THE FREESTER

**Price:** \$4000 **Distributor:** Pot Cars **Contact:** [www.totcars.com](http://www.totcars.com)

Have you been blessed with children? Adoptive children? Kids in the neighbourhood always coming round? Or are you, perhaps, a hobbit? Maybe a mad scientist with a shrink ray like Dennis Quaid's boss in Inner Space? If the answer to any of these slightly odd questions is yes then the Freester is for you. It is, as former PCPP art director Emma Wicks once said "an ickle car". What's more, it has an ickle 28cc two-stroke motor, a centrifugal clutch, disc brakes and a top speed of 20kph. Petrol reserves last 90 minutes so you can put this thing on the front lawn and watch your hellish progeny go round and round and round and round... Of course, since it's a two-stroke, odds are that after a couple of years you'll be cursing and screaming at this thing as you dismantle half the engine just to clear the fuel lines. You know, like a lawnmower.



## POWER JOY III RETRO ARCADE SYSTEM

**Price:** \$50 **Distributor:** ThinkGeek **Contact:** [www.thinkgeek.com](http://www.thinkgeek.com)

This is a weird little toy - it's basically a gaming controller with a 'console' built inside. There are no cartridges or other removable media, the 84 games are all stored inside the controller and you just connect it directly to the TV. The games include such classics as 1942, Galaga, Dig Dug, Gradius and more and some, such as Tetris, can be played on the controller's LCD screen. The controller also has a light gun built in for all the shooters like Operation Wolf (what a classic!) and although all this makes the form factor kind of weird, you can't accuse it of lacking features. There's even a second controller included for two-player action. A groovy stocking-stuffer. It'll hardly replace your trusty GameCube, but for instant retro arcade gratification, it's hard to go past.



## VONIA BONE CONDUCTING HEADPHONES

**Price:** TBA **Distributor:** Vonia **Contact:** [www.vonia.co.za](http://www.vonia.co.za)

From the "this creeps me out and I'm not even entirely sure why" files, these headphones promise to eliminate the health risks and potential hearing loss caused by jamming little bits of foam into your ears to listen to music, instead directly manipulating your auditory nerve by vibrating your actual skull. Shudder. At last, the word 'headphone' realises its true meaning - ears

are so last century dude, you need to be listening with your whole HEAD now. Me, I would have called them skullphones. Extensive tests on pre-orgasmic women of possible mediterranean extraction (see image) are trying to determine if prolonged use of these things either rattle yours brains into oblivion or cause your jaw to fall off. Get yours today!



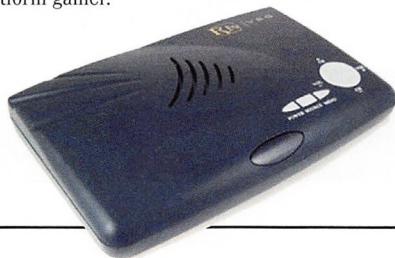


## VISUAL ENTERTAINMENT GENERATOR

**Price:** \$137 **Distributor:** ThinkGeek **Contact:** [www.thinkgeek.com](http://www.thinkgeek.com)

Now why didn't someone come up with one of these ten years ago? This slim black box plugs into your PC monitor's second input (or in to a separate monitor) and allows you to display a standard video feed, be it from TV antenna, VCR, DVD or, crucially, game console. The unit outputs at 1024x768, which is damned crisp, and it includes a remote control so you can channel surf as normal. This thing is a far cry from tiny

windowed PC TV tuner outputs and it's a hell of a lot easier to set up - just plug it in an away you go. Truly a godsend for the modern multi-platform gamer.



## USB MEMORY WATCH

**Price:** \$389 **Distributor:** Mstation **Contact:** [www.mstation.com.au](http://www.mstation.com.au)

Now here's a crazy thing - a regular wristwatch with a built-in 128MB USB memory vault. Arrive at your destination, casually check the time, and then download an MP3 of your latest single into the radio station's AudioVault PC, along with a small virus that makes it play the MP3 twice an hour. A sure fire road to success! The full-size USB plug is permanently attached to the watch, which might at first seem a bit of a worry, but it does mean you can be confident of being able to attach the thing to any USB-equipped PC without having to carry your own

set of cables in your pocket. That means, you could still download stuff from this watch even if this watch IS ALL YOU ARE WEARING! We're talking NUDE CONSPIRACIES! And a watch.



## MPEYE MP3 PLAYER

**Price:** \$389 **Distributor:** Mstation **Contact:** [www.mstation.com.au](http://www.mstation.com.au)

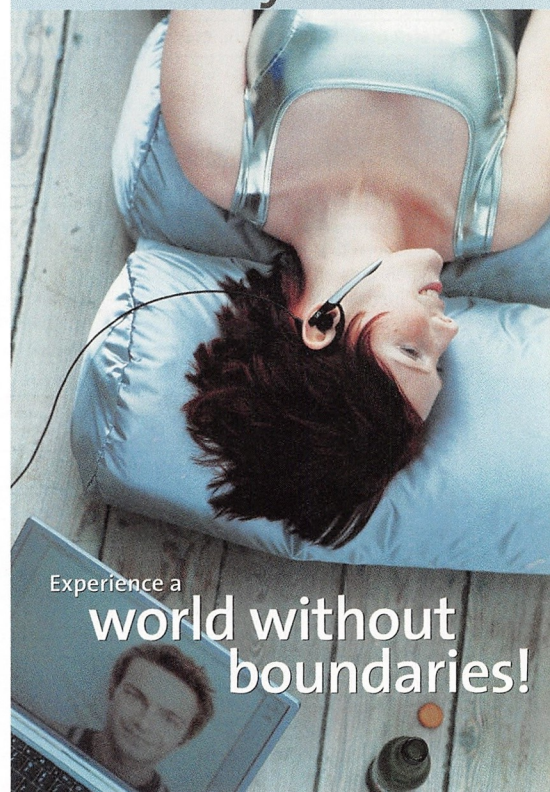
Another month, yet another small, sleek 256MB MP3 player. Yes, the market is totally saturated with these damn things and before the decade is out this pundit predicts they'll be giving them away free with your breakfast cereal, but for now the tasty ones are few and far between. And this is one of those proud few. The MPeye (which we guess should be read MP eye rather than M Pey) has all the features we've come to expect from

these solid-state machines - 256MB memory, FM tuner, voice recording, upgradeable firmware, blue back light and slightly doubtful aesthetics. However, as the image shows, the MPeye also includes a little hoop-shootin' game you can play while engaged in the stupefying drudgery of listening to your favourite music. Or waiting in line for free breakfast cereal. Or whatever.



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# CINEMAWARE

For when you want to  
watch instead of play...  
With Vanessa Morgan

## One Hour Photo

**Distributor:** Fox **Classification:** M



Americans don't like to see their funny men play serious, let alone sinister, roles. One Hour Photo places the comedic king, Robin Williams, under the unflattering white light of fast paced retail as Sy the photo guy. With little blood or violence, director Mark

Romanek slowly builds an unnerving story around the sterile life of a man who has nothing but his fantasy life. It's been a long time since a film has drawn me into its headspace so swiftly that I needed to pause and walk away, so as to break the spell! Creepy!

## Phone booth

**Distributor:** Fox **Classification:** M



The hook of this film is not what is being said but how it is said and by whom. Colin Farrell could be yelling out his shopping list and we'd all stop to have a listen. Girls would faint in the streets and guys would marvel at his charisma, the guy just has 'it'.

Farrell gives an entirely believable performance from his tiny glass prison, right down to the Bronx accent. Of course, it does help that he is backed up by the 90s brat pack leader Kiefer Sutherland and the often overlooked Forest Whitaker.

## The Magdalene Sisters

**Distributor:** Magna Pacific **Classification:** M



Sadly this is based on a true story where the only wrong done by the main characters is to be women. The 'fallen children' are teenage girls who are taken away from their family, often at the instruction of their families, because they were pretty enough to draw the

boys' attention, for falling pregnant or because they were raped. The story of the Magdalene Sister is one of cold and cruel punishment against girls who often became insane and social inept adults all within the walls of a nunnery. Not easy to watch but an important story to tell.

## The Simpsons: Season 3

**Distributor:** Fox **Classification:** G



Season 3 when The Simpsons went into overdrive as a pop culture phenomenon and the guest were lining the streets outside Matt Groening house to get ridiculed. Guests include Magic Johnson, Aerosmith, Sting, Kelsey Grammer, and Spinal Tap. Is the box set

worth the 11-year wait, well maybe! Extras, extras and more extras are the reason to purchase; if you're a fan you've already taped every episode in order and filed them under year date. Do us all a favour buy the DVD and stay off the streets!

## Bad Eggs

**Distributor:** Roadshow **Classification:** M



Australian comedy and Australian film have become one and the same of late with each new release a similar brand of bland. And no, we shouldn't have to suffer through the same old storylines and jokes because it's home grown. Bad Eggs is a step in the right direction for

Australian comedy, if not Australian film; it is simple and sometimes predictable but is supported by two great comedians (Mick and Bob) equipped with clever, witty dialogue. Decent laughs for when the footy gets washed out.

## The Good Girl

**Distributor:** Fox **Classification:** M



When Jennifer Aniston spouts the words "I saw in your eyes that you hate the world, I hate it too", it's a little hard to believe. The Friends star chose this low budget 'arty' film and large pay cut to break out as a 'serious actor'. While Aniston reaches out for a kindred spirit

in Tom (Jake Gyllenhaal) there is little spark and no chemistry between the two as they bumble through sleazy road side motels and lunch meetings at the Retail Rodeo. The performances are admirable considering that the 'dark' script lacks both wit and charm.

## The Best of Not the 9 o'clock News: Vol.1

**Distributor:** Roadshow **Classification:** M



Big hair, nasty hair, gorillas - this is what the early eighties and comedy is really all about! This pastiche of wit and satire launched the careers of cast and crew into the comedy world, including Rowan Atkinson, Mel Smith and Griff Rhys-Jones. Goolies, Zips, Supa Dupas

and Abba tributes - nothing was sacred if a laugh could be found. Volume one is a collection of the best of sketches from 1979 - 1982 and is not to be missed if you're a closet Rowan Atkinson fan hiding from all those whom only know him as Mr Bean.

## Waking Up in Reno

**Distributor:** Roadshow **Classification:** M

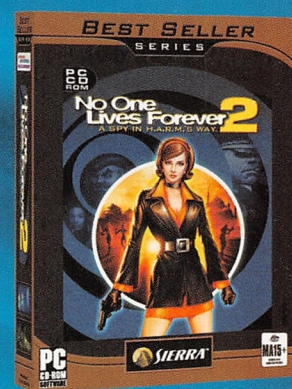
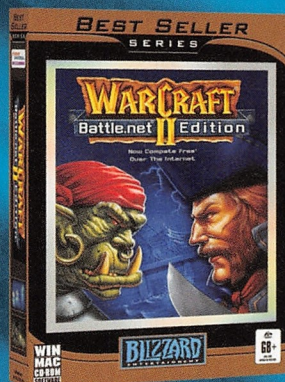
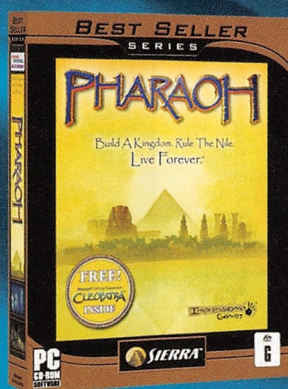
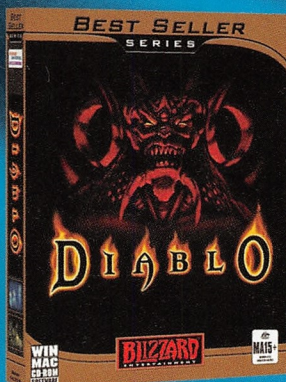


Well, if the name isn't enough to put you off, then the cover should do the job. The premise might have been funny after a truck load of beer and in some countries monster truck rallies are considered sport, but I cannot see how this film managed to drum up enough support to

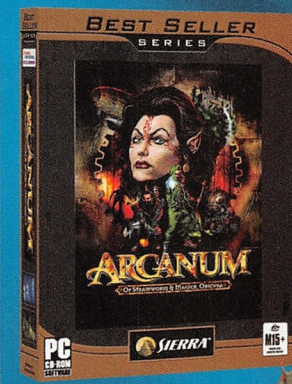
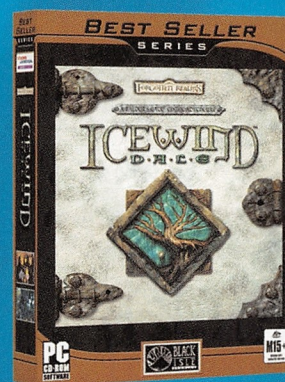
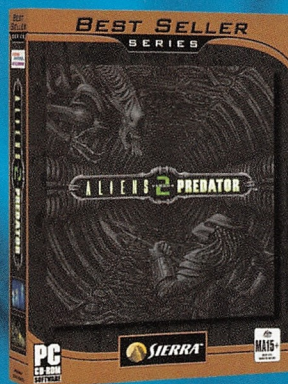
get four established actors in leading roles. I'm not sure who's to blame here. Is it Charlize Theron's bad fashion accessories? Billy Bob Thornton's moustache? Natasha Richardson's southern bell? Or is it Patrick Swayze? Nevertheless, heads must roll!



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OUT TO PLAY: Timothy C. Best



# Roasting Old Chestnuts

**T**here has been a long-running debate about gameplay versus graphics. It's an old and well-worn chestnut that gets revived every time grumpy reviewers get a game with a puffed out chest and nothing under the feathers.

I've come to a different understanding of the problem: our games technology kills off gameplay in a Darwinian way. I'm talking about a survival of the fittest, natural selection, type of thing. Ninety percent of the time we throw the old dinosaur in with the pack of hunting dogs and hope that they get on. FPS shooter games are pretty much the sole exception. They are games of the age. They use what we've got and have gameplay that complements what's going down.

They need ploys to be pushed to draw dozens of fearsome foes, they need surround sound to tell you where the bad guys are, they need just a touch of physics to let you track foes in near-real time and faux depth perception works just fine for direct-fire weapons or lobbed grenades with a blast radius.

## Perspective

You could argue that flight and racing games also come off pretty well, but peeking out of those genres you start seeing some pretty basic problems.

For example, we, as people, only have experience navigating a 3D world from the first person perspective. We're not used to interacting with things via a camera floating behind us somewhere, but this is exactly what people decided would be good for platform games that require precise jumping and dodging.

Developers still have problems getting the camera right. Do you look it over the shoulder so we can always see obstacles head-on or do you make it roaming so that things don't block your view?

Either way's a gamble. Last night I watched my girlfriend trying to line up jumping puzzles in Kingdom Hearts and my heart sank as I realised that the developers had nothing better to throw her way than a puzzle that dates back to Donkey Kong. Jumping works really well in 2D, even while shooting and swinging a sword, but anyone who's had experiences with the 3D equivalent will know it's a different story altogether.

Even more thoughtful games like

real-time strategy have jumped on the visceral 3D bandwagon, but most of the time it doesn't give us much beyond obscuring units, confusing line-of-sight, introducing units that fly in 2D and making camera control a chore. Yes, it all looks pretty and, sure, some games like the Total War series take into account downhill momentum, but mostly 3D is just a keeping-up-with-the-Jones thing. In how many games can you battle across multiple levels of a building, climb a tree, or even fly at multiple altitudes? Only now are we seeing games like Commandos 3 and War of the Ring even letting players climb in any meaningful way.

As far as true 3D movement, the sci-fi Homeworld series is pretty much the only one that brings home the Z-axis bacon. Even then it's too hard to manage for many, because strategy is tricky when you're wondering which way is up and you're trying to grab units flying in 3D space with a rectangular lasso tool.

Doesn't anyone find it odd that developers have moved to 3D en masse when players don't have input devices that work in 3D? Mice only scamper on tables - they don't even look up.

## Graphic Impact

Even if these mice did look up, they might see that a 3D view of the world just adds depth to a bump-mapped expectations trap.

Imagine trying to develop Chess now-a-days. You have these huge 3D Castles roaming around and then you have these little pawns with big heads. In Chess pawns can take misplaced rooks with a single diagonal step. When these are little carved ivory pieces this seems perfectly reasonable, but when you see one pawn storm a castle and raze it to the ground, you really start wondering what type of drugs the developers were on. Surely the size and sheer volume of stone implies that it can defend itself against one footman - for cripes sake the guy isn't even Special Forces!

Of course, the rook's power comes in its freedom of movement and its usefulness on the board. As in all games, the pieces are just symbols, not digitised chunks of reality.

What's more, sometimes you want a symbol not to say too much, sometimes you don't want to see the hero too clearly so it can be anyone ...



**when you see one pawn storm a castle and raze it to the ground, you really start wondering what drugs the developers were on**

sometimes you want things to remain abstract, like the horror under the bed, because they are scarier that way.

## Readerly Text

Graphics power doesn't have to club poor abstraction to death, but modern notions of immersion and game cohesion tend to get it drunk and start challenging its manhood if it doesn't.

Let's just think back to text games, things like Zork, then Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy and through to hybrids like Sierra's Police Quest and Leisure Suit Larry.

It was a time of endless possibility.

In these games you could walk up to a hot chick and type, "Dance the Hula," in the hopes of impressing her. Now there was only a tiny chance the game would let you get Hawaiian but there was a chance. The developers could write in any event you could imagine and make it part of their game.

This changed with the evolution of point-and-click. Now your cursor would change colour or shape when you rolled it over an item you can take or use. Streamlined commands appeared on the inventory like "Use" or "Combine".

How does this system allow you to dance the Hula? If you have a "Dance the Hula button" then you ruin the surprise and you have pre-defined every action right in front of the player.

Admittedly, no one wants to type, "open door" a 1000 times, it's much easier just to left-click the sucker; likewise, no programmer wants to type in endless streams of keywords so that players can stumble through dialogue options to uncover gold. Now, if we want players to do something extraordinary it has to fit into an overall scheme of graphics, physics, repeatable game options and smart cursor icons.

## Adaptation

Don't get me wrong, there are a bunch of titles that make me want to giggle like a school girl at a pyjama party. I'm not saying that 3D is killing unborn games, that ATI and NVIDIA should be given to the purifying flames or that the extra dimension is a sham.

I just can't help but feel hardware development is incredibly lop-sided and that until we get a leash on the technology, or we have a 3D-ideas revolution, we've evolved graphics over gameplay.

It's like falling in love with a car design that's ten times faster than the previous model without falling in love with the idea of improved steering and brakes. That's all well and good, but you can't be surprised when all your race courses start looking like quarter-mile drag strips.



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## TECH TALK: Stuart Calvin

# In the national interest

**T**here's lots of rosy talk about communications and information technology in Australia. The positives are talked-up as usual but I don't see a lot of comment about our strategic state of affairs. Why can I get a 1.5Mbps connection in Hayseed Wisconsin or Buttfrost Norway for USD\$17.00 per month with no download limit? Why South Korea has 10Mbps connections for the same price as 1.0Mbps in the sunburnt country? Maybe it's because Australian users have to absorb the cost of building cross-ocean pipelines like the Southern Cross Cable, which is in itself over 30 thousand kilometres of multi-core fibre optic cable. Even after the pipeline is built, Australian companies have to pay US networks for connectivity. But why is this not a government responsibility for absorbing "in the National Interest" costs. Hmph. For Senator Alston, nothing 'communicative' or 'informative' was in the National Interest.

In Australia we think we have many choices in regards to digital communication and content. After all, there's cable, ADSL, ISDN, Dial-up, wireless and satellite. Several of those infrastructure alternatives can bundle services such as Pay-per-View video, free-to-air TV and Pay-TV; in fact the type of digital content is unlimited. Consider these choices as the playing field substrate. On the playing field are all the providers, refereed rather badly, I must say, by Government regulators. Yes Senator Alston, you can run but not hide. The people who get rained on are us spectators. Yeah we're spectators because we're not allowed to get involved. Where I work, the executives have to value-add. Anyone on around ninety grand a year better be value-adding or their reason for existence is not only highly questionable, I'd be firing their boss as well. An Australian Government Departmental Secretary has a LOT of clout. After the post-appointment "big hands, small map" stuff is out of the way, a department secretary must wield the department as a strategic partner for all Australians. Any fool can manage but it takes a transformational leader to develop a life-like strategic partnership and haul it into the future; you know - "revolutionise", "change", "strategic direction" and all that bullshit-bingo crap. I don't think that the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts (DCITA) went anywhere USEFUL under the stewardship of Senator Alston and the Secretary of the



Department in eleven years, dear reader. DCITA itself says that the Department provides strategic advice and professional support to the Australian Government on a wide range of significant and rapidly changing policy areas. Their "significant policy areas" must differ from mine. I can't recall Helen Williams ever having to answer to a Parliamentary Committee for the dearth of strategy so lacking from DCITA. Fay Holthuyzen the Deputy Secretary Communications doesn't seem to be on the radar screen either.

So girls, where is our national information infrastructure? The Age newspaper says that "the Australian internet user is a long-suffering individual, one who is stoic, one who is prepared to put up with things if he or she believes they are being told the truth". Frankly, we don't know the truth. National governments must be fully engaged in health, education, national road and rail transport, and defence issues, y'know, all the decent basic "in the National Interest" stuff that you don't want self-interest groups regulating. Who'd argue that a country-wide communications and information infrastructure is not in the national interest? Man was put on the moon a long time ago yet my good buddy who lives a bit of a spit from Telstra's Melba Exchange in Canberra is stuck on dial-up. The

Melba exchange has been enabled for ADSL service and at last count, the exchange had 511 ports available. HUH!? Go figure. There are few other real choices. Cable internet uses the high-capacity pay television infrastructures to deliver fast, two-way internet access to areas covered by the rollout. BigPond uses the Foxtel cable and Optusnet uses the Optus pay television cable. We have cable in the ACT but since TransACT pork barrelled its way onto the streets there's no way that Optus will lay a cable around Canberra. Telstra broadband cable is practically non-existent in Canberra's leafy suburbs and satellite is simply not an option. In Australia we use a regular phone line modem for the return path, so Satellite is only of benefit for downloading and playing multimedia streams. It does comparatively little to aid web browsing and does absolutely nothing to help online gaming. The modem you get with ADSL will continue to work if you decide to change ADSL providers, whilst a cable modem from Telstra is useless outside BigPond's network. There are too many suburbs where cable isn't deployed, leaving you with no option but to choose ADSL. But if you live in Zelman Place Melba it's back to dial-up hell.

I like solutions on my desktop instead of wondering what piece of

infrastructure runs under the road or through the building. I want 'desktop' delivery of digital content without having the hassle of delivery mode. I don't want to know how it gets to the wall plate, I just want to plug it in. Let me put it this way: in terms of national infrastructure there should be ONE PIPE for consumers, industry and government. Call me socialist, call me simple, I prefer pragmatist. Don't bother arguing physical and digital security issues because telephone wires can be snipped, outback microwave transmitters are as susceptible to Semtex as they are to hail stones, and fibre optic cable just loves a chainsaw. Our domestic pipe should've been laid years ago but it wasn't and still isn't. Senator Alston and his Departmental Secretary should've value-added by developing a national infrastructure plan for communication and information technology during the Senator's tenure. Moreover, Senator Alston should've had the moral foresight to take the concept to the security cabinet and carried the funding on the back of the counter-terrorism initiatives, if not the political fortitude to carry the concept to the parliament and the people because it was in the national interest. You want a business model for national IT infrastructure? Like national roads, the Australian Government will own it and contractors will build it. Road users pay road, fuel and licence taxes, so too do users pay a pipe tax but there's no tax increase because we already pay GST on the goods and services required for digital connectivity. Every Australian Government department has to kick in, as do state and territory governments. Wealthy urban local government can assist with the pipe costs for high density dwellings (they caused the problem in the first place - it's just a grab for rates and taxes after all). Industry has to kick in as well, everyone kicks in. The beauty of it is that the playing field is levelled. The propeller heads are still happy because they get to stay server-side with reliable feeds. They can concentrate on geeky but necessary pursuits. All the MBA graduates have to do is differentiate their products, find a competitive advantage, get a tick-in-the-box for their ROI and spend on marketing. As for you and me, there's just one type of hole in the wall, it doesn't matter what the infrastructure is and we all get to be Low Ping Bastards.

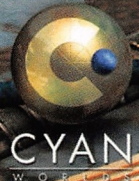
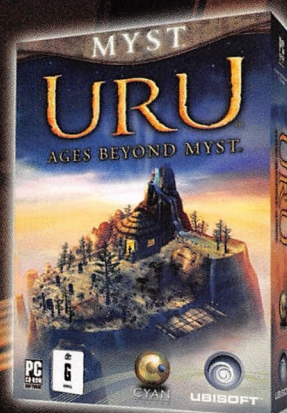


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# THE GUERRILLA GAMER



## The Great Crime

**P**ersonally I think I'm agreement with about nine bazillion games forum trolls when I say the UN should stop stuffing around trying to prosecute the likes of Augusto Pinochet and (among the outré South-East Asian members) Henry Kissinger for war crimes and instead focus the full fury of their bureaucracy on the bastards who stole the Half Life 2 source code.

Like the Kennedy Assassination, the Apollo 11 moon landing, and Sara-Marie getting voted out of Big Brother 1, we will always remember where we were and what we were doing when those bastards stole the Half Life 2 source code. I, for instance, was drunk, celebrating the impending release of Half Life 2 and looking forward to a new generation of groovy Half Life 2 mods. In fact, I'd been drinking with a bunch of mates and discussing our own Half Life 2 mod which we were planning to develop - it was a drinking mod, where you had to secure and dominate pubs dotted across a map - when we heard about those bastards stealing the source code.

Let's sit back and think about it. Those bastards stole the source code. Of Half Life 2. Have I said it enough? Can you comprehend how massively important this is to us, to all of us? Not just to gamers, to everyone. Forget the war on terror. Forget 9/11. Forget hunting down Osama and people in the US who don't pay parking tickets (terrorist bastards). Forget all that.

I mean, what kind of world are we living in where a company can't even go ahead and make the best game in the history of everything without having their source code stolen? Thank God the Doom 3 source code hasn't also been stolen or I might just have to take to the streets in a mad axe-wielding rampage.

The knock-on effects of the worst crime in human history are only now beginning to be felt. For a start, the game has been delayed until April. April! That's like... hang on... thirty days hath September, April, June and... carry the one... that's not until next year! What the hell are we supposed to do until then? Play the Sims? Sign up for yet another interminable Counter-Strike tournament? Do you realise how SICK I am of that game, and how SICK I am of Condition Zero even though I've never even seen it run?

Apart from the whole actual games playing thing, the delay of Half Life 2 also means we won't have a



new killer application with which to impress our parents, partners, colleagues or passers-by, at least not until next year. If we haul people into the computer room now, all we can show them are a bunch of blurry videos or last-generation 3D action titles such as, uh, SpyHunter. People will accuse us of playing LAST YEAR'S GAME. And we will be. And by the time Half Life 2 is released, in April 2004, even the games that are released this year, they'll be last year's games too.

Me, I feel most sorry for that special breed of skinny year eight kid who gets picked on at school until he tells his mates that before the end of the year he'll have a game so awesome, so amazing, that they'll just have to respect him. Don't laugh, this kind of thing goes on all the time. And then, when this kid finally has to admit the game won't be released until April, the bullies will call him a liar and flush him, or beat the snot out of him, or take his canteen money, or in extreme cases get him addicted to crack.

Right now I want to use my unique position as the mouthpiece of Australia's outraged gamers and send a message to the bastards who stole the Half Life 2 source code: I hope you're satisfied. This is exactly what you wanted, and you got it, so I

hope you're satisfied. I hope you're having a good time playing Half Life 2 months before we'll even see it, and I hope you'll have fun being the best in multiplayer and completely owning all our arses by the time we finally get on a few legitimate servers. I hope it was all worth it, you bastards. You might think you've won, but really you've lost, because at the end of all your thievery and lies what do you have? Only the best game in the history of everything, before anyone else in the whole world. To me, that means a lot less than waiting another six months and being able to go and legitimately pay a legitimate \$100 for a legitimate copy in a legitimate store.

And let's not forget Valve. With this current set-back how the hell can we expect them to finish Team Fortress 2 now? How are they going to build any more cool movies for us to drool over as we set our Windows Media Player on Repeat and watch the G-Man wiggle his eyebrows suggestively over and over again? How must they feel, down there at Valve central, every time they look at the torn cardboard box where they'd kept the source code and think "If only we'd spent \$1500 of our millions on a damn safe none of this would have happened"? They're the real victims, not us, not the children,

not the Electronic Boutique franchises who will have to close down now they won't have Half Life 2 revenue to boost them over the Christmas slump, and the real victims CERTAINLY aren't those bastards who stole the source code in the first place. They're not freedom fighters, people, they're TERRORISTS. We should set the Patriot Act on them we should. We should tell Big George to hop in his Paladin tank with the laser upgrades and then use his Particle Cannon on them over and over again!

I have to play Counter-Strike with my little NEPHEW tonight people, that's how far this insanity has gone. So take to the streets. Storm the citadel. Start a pirate radio station or even better, get a Tripod website and make a bunch of cartoons about how suckful the behaviour of these pirates really is. THAT'LL make them regret their thievery. Goodnight!

*The Guerilla Gamer is a bored and crusty older gaming journalist who obviously thinks of this column as displaying his understanding of 'irony'. In truth, he hates the Half Life brand and everything it stands for, and word has it he knows who stole the source code and in fact sent them a congratulatory note. Although, it might have been sarcastic.*



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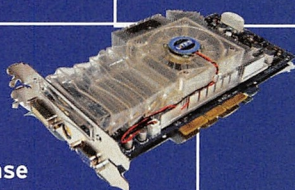
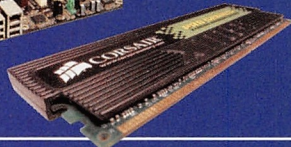
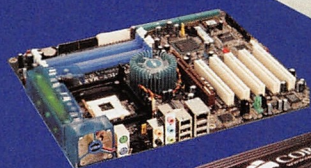
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# Doom 3

Yes, it's time once again for the annual Doom 3 feature in which we check the pulse of some geeky Texans and suppress the urge to ask why the damn game isn't finished yet. **Daniel Wilks** wonders if Carmack will have flown to Mars by the time the game gets released...

**D**oom 3. The very name conjures up images of advanced rendering engines, monsters, old school dynamics, John Carmack and screenshots rationed out with enough scientific precision to keep punters interested throughout the entire development process. That's right, it's time again that we receive our newest care package of screens from id as well as the chance to speak to Tim Willits, the Lead Designer on Doom 3 and Todd Hollenshead, the CEO of id.

Although the idea of interviewing the guys responsible for one of the most eagerly anticipated games of next year is quite exciting, it's also something of a problematic exercise. id Software has a reputation for very carefully controlling the flow of information to the media, so I was not surprised then when I rang the States to talk to the team only to find it was a conference call, not only with Tim Willits and Todd Hollenshead but also Australian and American Activision representatives acting as enforcers, making absolutely sure that my questioning didn't step out of line as it already had done.

You see, when we were first offered the interview we wanted to do an "Under the Hood" style feature about the engine, so we sent off the relevant questions for vetting. On the morning of the interview (about a fortnight after sending the questions) we were informed that they would not be answering any real technical questions... and we went back to the drawing board. Be that as it may, messrs Willits and Hollenshead always have something interesting to say, so after a moment of bluster and some perfunctory greetings as well as a not-so-subtle hint from the American PR rep to keep the questioning in line we kicked off.

## Sounds of demons

To set the scene we began talking about genre, or more precisely, horror. Even more precisely the problems with horror games,



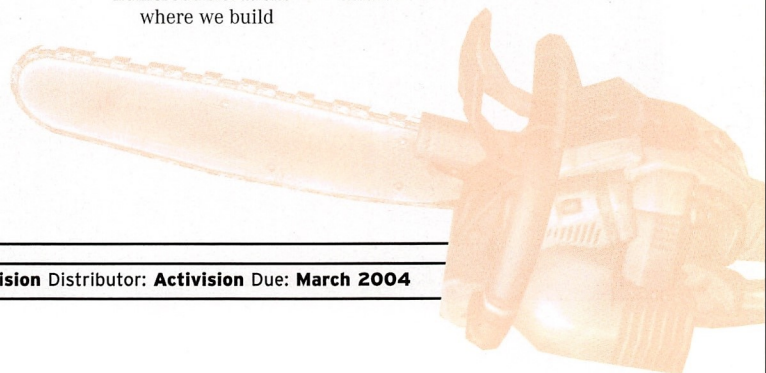
**sometimes the anticipation can be more frightening than the actual event**

namely that much of the genre uses the fact that the audience is a passive observer unable to influence events. This passive nature of the genre works in its favour, but often seems to contradict the essence of a game, namely its interactivity. Tim Willits agreed with our assessment but added:

"DOOM 3 is scary because you are in control. Only in first-person gaming do you see through the eyes of the character, and in turn sense that things are happening to you. DOOM 3 has many gaming elements from fast paced combat, to more deliberately paced exploration, and we derive much of the fear through the pacing of those elements.

"Our focus is on putting you in numerous situations where we build

tension without combat. For example, you may find yourself walking through an area of the UAC when all of a sudden the lights go out and you are lost in complete darkness. You hear the sounds of something crawling in the ceiling panels above you. You pull your flash out but then can't carry your gun. You stumble around the darkness trying to find the exit, as the sounds of demons grow louder. You can almost feel them in the room with you but you still can't see anything. Then, without warning the lights come back on, and you find that you are surrounded by demons - all of them bent on destroying you, and you must then fight your way out. Sometimes the anticipation of what is



Developer: **id Software** Publisher: **Activision** Distributor: **Activision** Due: **March 2004**





going to happen can be more frightening than the actual event."

We took from Tim's description that the environment will play a major role in the fear level of the game and as such will have a high level of interactivity with players being able to affect the lighting, operate machines and computers and the like. We next asked about how the environmental interaction was handled. Once again Tim chose to field the question:

"Interactions with the environment are handled in a couple ways; the GUI (Graphical User Interface) system, and our proprietary physics system. We've added a GUI to the computer systems throughout the UAC. It is a very powerful interactive paradigm; it doesn't require additional controls. You interact with the GUIs the same way you interact with a web page, and the graphics are presented with a flash-like level of interactivity and quality. The computers can control anything from complex machinery to simply turning on or off the lights in a room."

A potential hazard with having an advanced level of interactivity is that it can be alienating to new players, but Tim was eager to clear up our apprehension:

"We've found this to be a very easy thing for players to understand. You simply walk up to a GUI, your weapon lowers and a mouse cursor appears on the screen. When you are finished interacting with the computer you just walk away and your weapon reappears."

"Our physics system also allows a new level of interaction with the environment. Any object in the world (including monsters) can be assigned physical properties like mass and friction. When that object



## I firmly believe that the DOOM 3 rendering paradigm is the future of FPS games

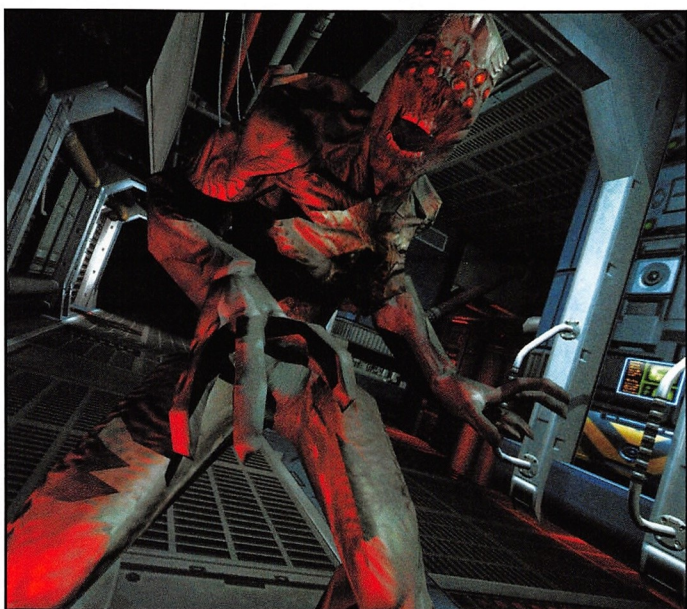
is shot, kicked, blown away by an explosion, etc, the object will fall, bounce, tumble or fly through the air exactly as you would expect."

### Potential power

We already knew that the Doom 3 engine is going to be quite a radical leap forward in rendering technology, but what do the developers actually think of their contribution to the gaming world. We were expecting a self-aggrandising response, and whilst it is in part, it's also quite honest about the place of the game in the industry. As Todd Hollenshead put it, "The DOOM 3 engine is a bigger leap

technologically than the Quake 3 engine was, so it may take a bit longer before you see as many third-party games come out that are using it. However, I firmly believe that the DOOM 3 rendering paradigm is the future of FPS games and that the engine will be the foundation for a number of great games. The DOOM 3 tech has the potential to have an even longer useful life than Quake 3, which is arguably the longest-lived first person rendering engine ever."

Unfortunately my next question was on something of a sore point - multiplayer. The industry and community are torn on the issue of multiplayer with as many people finding it to be a necessary addition to any game as there are people who don't play multiplayer games. Personally I prefer a single player game to a multiplayer game with a single player campaign tacked on (as we have seen far too often in the past). Whatever the case may be, the trend for long-term success in the current market seems to be either compelling, large scale multiplayer







or non-linearity, neither of which it appears will play a role in Doom 3.

We asked Tim Willits about the decision to only include four players in multiplayer. "We currently are targeting four players," he replied. "We have some basic gameplay modes like Last Man Standing, Deathmatch, Tournament, One on One, and Team Deathmatch. We set out to make the best single player game that we could but we wanted to include a fun, solid multiplayer component to that game and one of the ways we did that was that we leveraged some of the really cool things we've done in single player into the multiplayer; things that people haven't seen before like turning lights on and off, using the physics engine in deathmatch controlling components of the levels in game. We think that even though we're only going for four players, we believe that it's definitely fun and exciting to play based on some of the feedback we received at Quake-Con earlier in the year.

"Revolutionary multiplayer has never been a goal except for innovating within some of the things that we are doing, uniquely on the technology side. Basically it's kind of like the original Doom where it's four players. When you play multiplayer, just like the original, you've got, yellow, red, green, blue



and those are your choices for player colours. People at Quake-Con were really excited about the realistic shadows. There were some stories of players creeping around the corner, shooting at the wall and discovering it's their own shadow. We really want to bring the dark, moody, creepy, spooky kind of game to the front with the deathmatch."

It kind of sounds as though id saw the fallout of Unreal II being released without a multiplayer component and have instead chosen to implement a cut down multiplayer to appease the fans. I hope id and Activision will forgive us for remaining politely sceptical about the multiplayer component, but we will of course reserve final judgement until we have the box in our hot little hands.

### Extra mod life

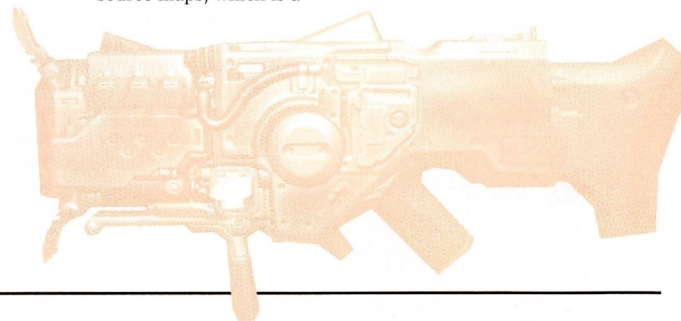
I next asked Tim if the multiplayer backbone would support more than four players so modders could create their own larger multiplayer games. His answer was a bit ambiguous to say the least, stating: "It does have that functionality in it but it's not something we plan to add when we release it. Raven's working on Quake 4 and that will have more than four players in it."

We're not sure if he means that they're not planning on increasing the size of multiplayer when shipped or whether they aren't planning to ship code with a larger multiplayer backbone, the latter definitely being problematic to say the least. Although id feels confident that players will pick up the four-person multiplayer, the current trend of more is better would seem to be at odds with this assessment.

Whilst it will take a while to discover whether id's bet on four person multiplayer proves a winner, there is absolutely no doubt that Doom 3 will be a hit with the modding community due to the advanced nature of the rendering engine. The developer

has pre-empted such interest by planning to ship an extensive editor with Doom 3.

"The really great thing about Doom 3 is that yes, it is the most complicated technology we've worked on but it should be one of the easiest to modify and to create mods for," Tim explains. "One of the reasons is that all of the tools that we used in development are actually included in the game. When you purchase Doom 3 you'll have all the source maps, which is a



**players creeping around, shooting the wall and discovering it's their own shadow**





big deal because it's something that has never been available with any of our games since the original Doom. So you'll have all the source maps, you'll have the map .esp, and you'll have the editor - you can just pull the console down and enter the editor and launch right into the game.

"We think we'll see a lot of mod developers using components of the game, you know like models, pieces of architecture, gameplay structures and scripts and things. They can look at what we did because it will all be there for them; they can take pieces of them, rearrange them and work with them in creating some of their own content. That's where I think Doom 3 will kind of shine in the mod development. Everything that we have there in the game is available for players. It's also really nice because a lot of the 3D packages - the really popular ones like Maya and 3D Max. We'll have importers and exporters for those packages so it will be easy for people to make models and get them into the game quickly." As the man behind Modlife, I think the potential of the modding engine is very exciting - let's just keep our fingers crossed that there is the capacity to upsize the multiplayer component.

At about this time we reached the part of the interview where it is traditional to ask a silly question to illicit a somewhat comedic response. My usual question is to ask developers what they think of John Romero after he told us to "Suck it down". But considering that Romero may once have been kind of close to the guys I was talking to, I thought better of it. Usually the comedic question does not go to print as all it really serves to do is soften up the interviewee for a final, probing question.



## I don't think it will be news to you that we'll revisit the Wolfenstein universe

### Keen on remakes

So instead of the usual Romero bash I asked if there was any chance of id doing a new Commander Keen, seeing as though we've seen remakes of both Wolfenstein and Doom. I was expecting maybe a chuckle and a polite no, but instead what I got was a good insight into both to the business mentality of id as well as the aims of the team.

"We don't have anything for Keen in development right now," Todd Hollenshead began. "We had some Keen projects, like we did Keen for Gameboy Colour but if we were to do something like that, and I think there are some opportunities out there, I think they would have to be in the right context. Keen is a kid's game franchise and that isn't really something that the team here at id are interested in working on. We'd rather do demons and monsters and blood and horror games which is not really fighting the Rutabagas and Brocolashes and Carrot Tops and those sorts of guys.

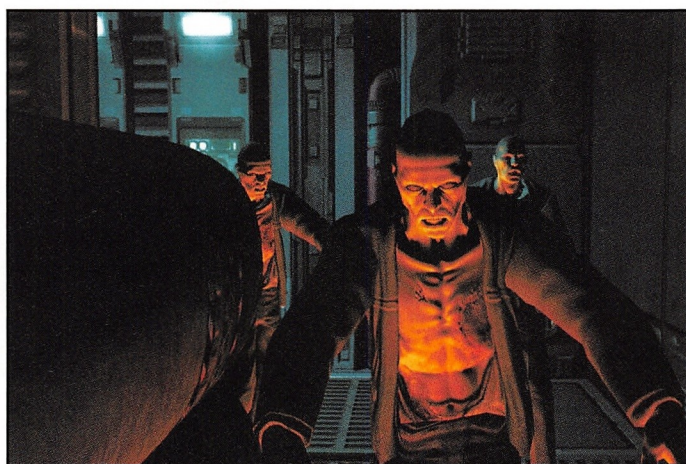
If there is the right opportunity with a developer that has some talent and experience and some cool ideas for what they could do with Keen and the platform opportunity was right then that would definitely be something we'd be interested in taking a look at. We don't have anything in the works right now.

"Our days are fairly full obviously with working on Doom 3, the project that everyone here at id is working on. We also have Quake 4, which is in development up at Raven and I don't think it will be news to you that at some point we anticipate that we'll revisit again the Wolfenstein universe."

By answering that the id team is more interested in making monsters and horror than kid's games, Todd gave me the perfect segue into my final question, something I have a very personal and vocal standpoint on - violence in games causing violence in children. I think it will come as no surprise that I think the argument is a load of crap. My opinion aside, id software has







repeatedly been at the forefront of the debate with Doom, Doom II and the entire Quake series being pinpointed at some time or other as being responsible for the decline of Western civilisation. I asked Todd if he thought Doom III would cop a similar amount of flack and if there were any safeguards in place to combat the debate.

"I don't think that most reasonable people put much stock in those claims," he replied, with refreshing candour. "There's no evidence to back that up. A lot of that stuff is just finger pointing. If

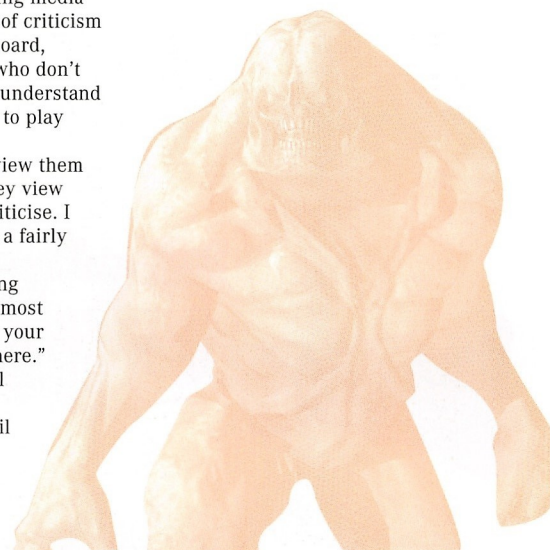
it's not rock and roll or comic books or movies then it's video games. I don't think that the people that are condemning the industry in that regard really have the factual basis to make the claims.

"The more important issue from my standpoint is the ratings. I don't know how the ratings there in Australia differ from those in the US but I know that the game will be rated. I won't pretend to be an expert on how that system works. Actually, I was instrumental in the introduction of a voluntary ratings code. I don't think we've ever tried

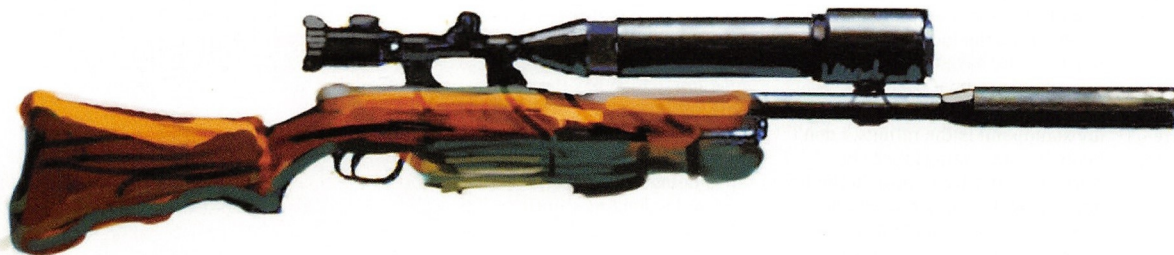
to deceive anyone about what the content of our game is and the point I made earlier was that we're not making games for kids. If the kids play the games it's ultimately something that comes down to parental responsibility and parents judging what is or is not acceptable for their own children. I think that this is the opportunity to make a judgement for the sort of entertainment that their children are involved in. It's something they're playing on a computer - it's not exactly something they can sneak off and do. It's not very portable from that standpoint.

"I'm sure that there will be some criticism of the game and content but I think that it's not unique from any emerging media standpoint - these sorts of criticism exists right across the board, especially from people who don't really get it. They don't understand why people would want to play video games, they don't understand. They may view them as a waste of time so they view that as fair ground to criticise. I tend to think that that's a fairly ignorant approach to an evaluation of an emerging medium, which has the most entertainment value for your dollar of anything out there."

And while you're still applauding, don't forget: it's not too long now until Doom III will reach our shores and irreversibly corrupt the minds of the young. We can't wait.









# Armed & Dangerous

By Timothy C. Best

Normally, when you picture a games studio you get an image of cola cans and pizza boxes with developers surrounded by high-contrast movie posters and having to watch where they swing their mouse for fear of knocking over some action figure from an obscure cartoon or game.

When I imagine the Planet Moon office, I get a totally different picture. It has Oompa Loompas replaying scenes from Fawlty Towers and the spirit of Benny Hill runs the mail server. The dictionaries are all Spanish and the thing that looks like a closet conceals a pole that looks like it should lead to the Batcave, but which instead connects directly to the kind of English pub that convinces soccer hooligans there is a God.

Now you probably think I'm just trying to make a rock-solid case for increased medication, but it's not so. Understanding the angle at which Planet Moon attacks projects is central to understanding the feel of their latest game, *Armed & Dangerous*. It's all action, but it's a curry-bearing-missile action. It's an epic quest but it's one where the central artefact was nicked from its mighty keeper while he was whizzing on a tree, and it features a band of merry men who aren't above reviving one another using the backside of a pack animal (just like Han does for Luke in *Empire Strikes Back*, only, very, very wrong).

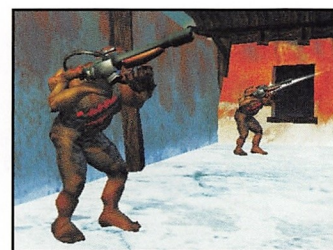
After *Giants*, which combined first-person shooter action, man-sized players buzzing around 100ft giants, squad-based strategy, and RPG elements, it's like the Planet Moon lads decided that it would be nice to concentrate on just one genre... namely action. Then, it seems, they started to get bored. Drunk and bored. To say they then went over-the-top with the action implies self-control. Planet Moon operates much farther out than "over the top", especially when it's drunk. Welcome to *Armed & Dangerous*.



## Earth Shattering Kaboom

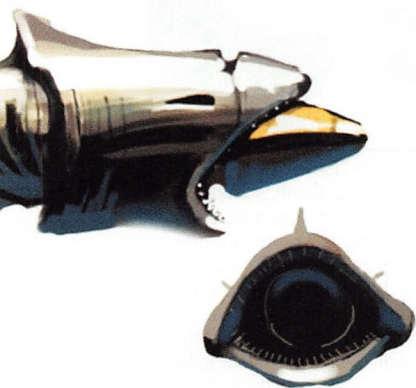
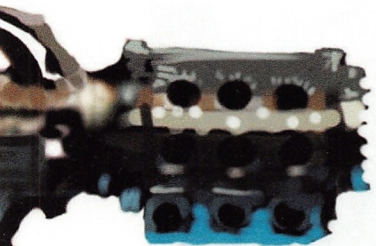
So the Book of Rule in the wrong hands and a whole planet enslaved. When the chips are down, who do you call? A rag-tag bunch of misfits, that's who. This time round, Roman and his crew prove the raggiest and taggiest. They are like Robin Hood and his merry men, if only Robin had started out as a hard-drinking Artful Dodger rather than the heir to Loxley Manor. He's is a blood-thirsty master marksman, mind and thief. His best friend, Jonesy, is a Scottish-moleman miner with a sense of humour so acidic it could clear rocks almost as quickly as his explosives.

Q1-11 is a robot who attained self-awareness via an insane obsession with tea and who seems



like he's going to burst into a song about being the very model of a modern major general. Finally, Rexus is Roman's foster father who has been reduced from the status of "great sage" to "blind old codger prop" by a blow to the head while whizzing on a tree. Some people are born to greatness; others lose it while seeing a man about a donkey. No matter their transportational needs, it's this fine quartet who must fulfil a prophecy, take in some sights and save the day.

Planet Moon's Aaron Loeb explains how *A&D* is like *Lonely Planet* with guns: "The game is a 21-mission travelogue as the *Lionhearts* journey from the frozen northlands, across mountains, over war-torn plains, and eventually arrive in the fabled city of Jerosa.



Developer: Planet Moon Studios Publisher: LucasArts Distributor: EA Due: Feb 2004





"Over the course of this journey, the player will discover the true meaning of the word Kaboom!"

## So it's an Action Game, huh?

Unveiling the extent of Kaboom to the frail human mind is a pretty lofty goal, but the guys at Planet Moon are just crazy enough to try.

Have you ever wondered why bad guys, who might actually want to shoot you, are the only things on the screen with health bars? How sissy is that? In Armed everything gets a health bar, especially buildings, and especially friendly buildings...being good is all about resisting temptation after all. So, if you are having trouble hitting that sniper with your rifle, maybe you



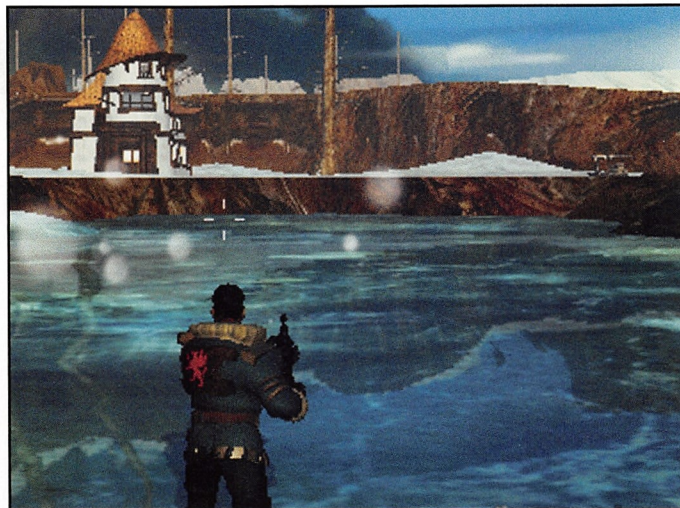
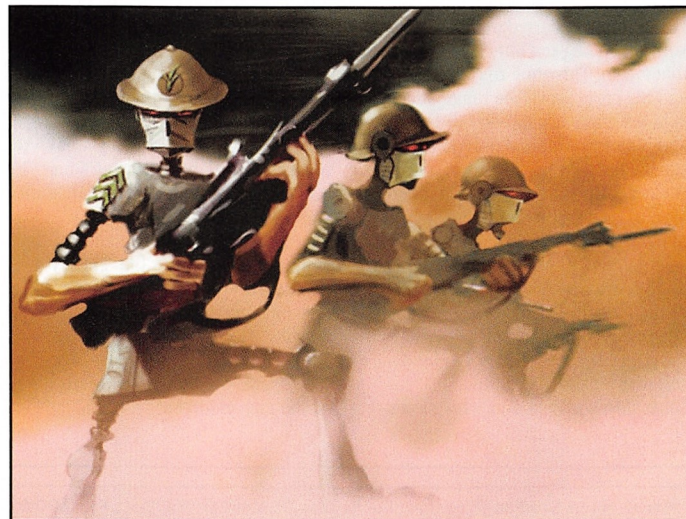
need to bring out the Gurner Portable Mortar and start having a go at the building he's in. Hey, it's a big target and it's obviously on the sniper's side.

The guns in this are huge. Some of them take out dozens of baddies at a time. If Roman and company aren't massively outnumbered (sometimes by the hundreds) and outgunned (sometimes by guns so crappy that they're bows) then you're watching one of the game's politically incorrect cut-scenes.

You've got flying beast-men, mechs, cannon fodder with an excess of gunpowder, dumb grunts who are surprisingly good at luring you into oceans of crossfire, teleporting monks (who really should know better) and even wild twiglets.

In one level you strap into a mounted rail-gun and have to hold back a tide of enemy forces (we're talking wave after wave, at the beach kind of tides here). In most games the objective is to kill a 100 miscreants in a certain time, in Armed & Dangerous you have to stop more than 100 slipping past and that should help give you a scale for the fast-and-furious metre.

The game uses a brand new



engine, Amityville II: The Possession. It was designed specifically to handle action on a mass scale. "The graphics portion revolves around the Prince Albert, our graphics pipeline," quips Loeb, "which has all the bells and whistles (bump mapping, environment mapping, etc.) and makes full use of the great parts of contemporary graphics processors (such as pixel shaders)." After the graphics work Planet Moon put into the beautiful Giants, you can probably expect the screen to teem with evil-doers.

## Not just another Target...

Just because there's plenty of targets doesn't mean that this game is Galaga with sidearms, something Loeb is keen to point out: "We wanted to make Armed & Dangerous a game that never got repetitive, where all of the weapons were fun to use, and where everything tied into an entertaining story.

"So, we don't have any levels where you start at point A, then run to point B, then have to run back to point A, then repeat. We don't use the same map over and over again. We have unique environments, lots of different missions to fulfil, secret stuff all over the place, and weapons that are usually insane enough to make you question reality."

If nothing else gets you about this game, the weapons should make you want to slap your momma (that's new scale of excitement by the way).

The Topsy-Turvy Bomb is probably the biggest crowd pleaser so far. Roman runs up, corkscrews it into the ground and then holds on for dear life. It flips the whole world (and your view) on its head just long enough for the bad guys fall off the ground and then come crashing back to earth. Then we have the homing Vindaloo rocket launcher that fires the most deadly Indian food known to man at enemies and the Land Shark Gun which fires a baby shark into the ground, fills it with steroids, and then guides it at your target. You get to see a fin cut through the earth and full-sized shark burst out of the ground and do a Jaws routine. The World's Smallest Black Hole, Sticky bombs, The Guy Fawkes Traitor







## we love games where you laugh out loud at the insanity and absurdity of it all

bomb and more mundane weapons like the Hawking Rifle, Flemming Machinegun and Cyclops Sniper Rifle round out the game's 17 weapons.

Not all of the gadgets are pure bang, bang, though, there's a jet pack too. It fires you straight up and at max altitude the gliding wings come out for some gliding down from on high. Sometimes you need a bit of perspective (read: death from above).

### Roman Around

Whether blowing up whole villages or flying around with his jet-pack, Roman can only get by with the help of his friends. While the game does tip its hat at squad tactics, Roman has only limited control of his crew; issuing general commands like stay put or follow closely. Most of the time you'll want them close for not only the added

fire power but for the comedy.

Jonesy and Q come with enough bickering and snide remarks to audition for Married With Children. With Planet Moon behind the Monty Python versus Red Dwarf style banter, don't be surprised if you die laughing more than once. Between the characters and the settings expect the oddball. With over an hour of Planet Moon-brand humour in the cut-scenes, expect a lot of oddball.

"We love games that are fun," says Loeb, "games where you laugh out loud, not just at humour, which varies to individual taste, but at the insanity and absurdity of it all."

### Armed and Wonker-y

To think that this game is all about the humour would be missing the point of the ridiculously exaggerated action. This game is about frantic action and adrenaline first.

It's clear that Loeb's keen to impress how far Planet Moon is willing to go to make this heist game as exciting for players as it is humorous: "Okay, well there's one level where we've hidden a secret box, and if you find the secret box, it

will actually email us your address. We then send four guys to your house to steal everything you own," he says.

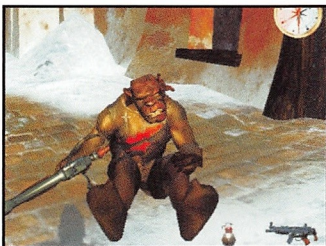
"Still not enough? How about this! Every 10,000th copy of the game comes with a golden ticket. If you get the golden ticket we will actually give you a real rocket launcher and fly you to the desert where you will be treated to three days and nights of blowing things up! Okay, that last part's a lie. So was the hidden, secret box thing. But the all other stuff is true."

Planet Moon's last game was the ambitious, genre spanning Giants, which seemed to trip over its own huge feet and its three pronged attack on gameplay. MDK before that was much more focused and was much tighter, if less ambitious. Armed & Dangerous seems to sit between these games and could pull a great heist, nabbing the best of both worlds. We'll see early next year.

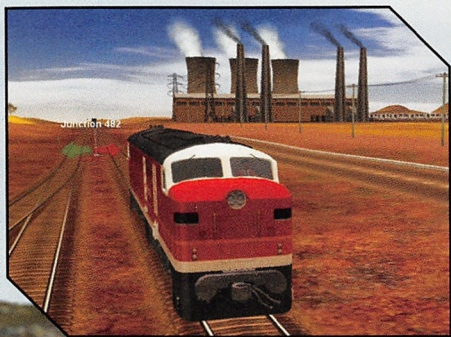


### SUITS WITH A SMILE

Publishing a Planet Moon game must be like trying rodeo games with a tornado. After games like Sam & Max, Full Throttle, Day of the Tentacle and Grim Fandango, it's obvious that LucasArts understands wacky humour, but the Moonies managed to even get these guys to throw a shoe: "There were certainly some fits caused by raunchiness in the early cut-scenes," says Armed producer Aaron Loeb, although we're still not sure whether to believe him. "While we still have some comical decapitations and a battlefield circumcision in there, there were some double entendres that made sailors blush originally. I can't tell you what they are because if we do another game, we'll try to sneak them into it." You've never quite seen action like this.







In 1997, people were getting bored with Command & Conquer. The realtime strategy genre, which had at first seemed so fresh and immediate, was getting stale. The actual strategy in these games was pretty limited - in C&C for instance, all you had to do was build sandbags around an enemy base and they were helpless, the simplistic AI unable to figure out that it could shoot through the barricades. Other tricks and spoofs abounded.

Then came Dark Reign. Exploding out of Brisbane, Australia, it took the world - and particularly Europe - by storm with its tweakable unit AI, realistic terrain effects and line-of-sight bonuses. The game was the product of a small Australian developer called Auran, headed up by CEO Greg Lane.

# UNDER THE HOOD



# Auran Jet

What happens when a games company stops making games to concentrate on building an infinitely flexible, infinitely expandable engine? And then, once that engine is up and running, what unexpected possibilities suddenly open up for that company? Australian developer Auran thinks it knows. **Anthony Fordham** engages the afterburners...

"The core philosophy of Dark Reign's Tactics engine was to build something that was configurable and reusable," he says, "because previous to getting into games I had been working as a contract programmer, where time was money and the only way to save time was to reuse chunks of code for similar tasks." The result of this way of thinking was a 2D RTS engine that could be configured entirely by using text files. Today, this kind of access to game code is fairly commonplace, but back in 1997 it was avant-garde stuff.

"In some of the early Command & Conquer clones, all unit behaviours and stats were

dramatically speeding up development and allowing developers to produce demos with real game content only a few weeks after starting on a project," says Lane.

The industry term for engines like Jet written as foundations for future games is "middleware". Typically, a developer buys a middleware license and can then immediately jump into game creation without all that tedious mucking about writing a renderer.

"What most people think of when they say game engine is the 3D renderer," says Auran's senior systems analyst and Jet guru David Howell, "with the other components such as

everything themselves. A hot young coder starts with a company and believes he can be the next John Carmack, can build an engine better than any other. Six months and a lot of money down the tube later and the hot young coder realises he's not that hot after all. That's where Jet comes in."

"It's definitely one of the biggest things we've had to combat when promoting Jet," says Greg Lane. In fact, to Lane there almost seems to be a preconception - especially among US developers - that middleware is in some way inferior to building your own engine from scratch.

"But it's crazy, the costs of developing games is skyrocketing and companies need to save money wherever they can if they expect their game to have a chance in hell of making it out there," says Lane.

**"..with the Tactics engine able to be reconfigured in a matter of hours, Auran had a major trump card over its competitors."**

actually hard-coded into the game," says Lane, "and this made it very time consuming for those developers to modify their games, even the tiniest detail."

But with the Tactics engine able to be reconfigured in a matter of hours, Auran had a major trump card over its competitors.

"We thrashed together a Cowboys and Indians top-down shoot-em-up in a matter of days, and this really impressed Activision, so I think that's what got us the Dark Reign deal."

Unfortunately for Auran, despite the impressive success of Dark Reign - it outsold Total Annihilation in Europe - the plucky Queensland company had picked the worst time to get into RTS. Almost as soon as Dark Reign was released, the market was bombarded with dozens of RTS titles, from the stellar Starcraft to the thought-provoking-in-a-very-bad-way Mission Humanity.

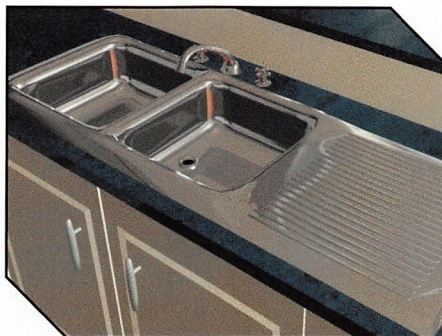
So the question was, where to next?

## Winds of change

"The most obvious thing to everyone at that point was that 3D was going to be the next big thing," says Greg Lane. "So we had to come up with an engine that was going to be as configurable as Tactics had been, have great visuals, not be limited to any one genre of game, and also work on multiple platforms."

The answer to that highly specific yet paradoxically also extremely broad-based question? Jet.

"Auran Jet is a 3D visualisation engine that is modular, expandable, extendable and is limited only by hardware and the imagination of the person using it. Not only is it designed to be a jack-of-all-trades, once you've decided on your game and locked in your design, Jet can be specifically customised to perform the tasks required of your project. It has the advantage of



sound and networking tacked on. Jet isn't like that. It's built from the ground up to be a complete game authoring environment, so it handles sound, it handles networking, it has a GUI editing system, and it handles all these things at the same level. Nothing gets precedence over anything else."

"Developers are very precious about their renderers," adds Jet's business manager Graham Edelsten, "and in fact we've noticed among developers that there's a tendency to want to do

## The donk

So that's the Jet philosophy - sell a complete authoring system to other companies to help



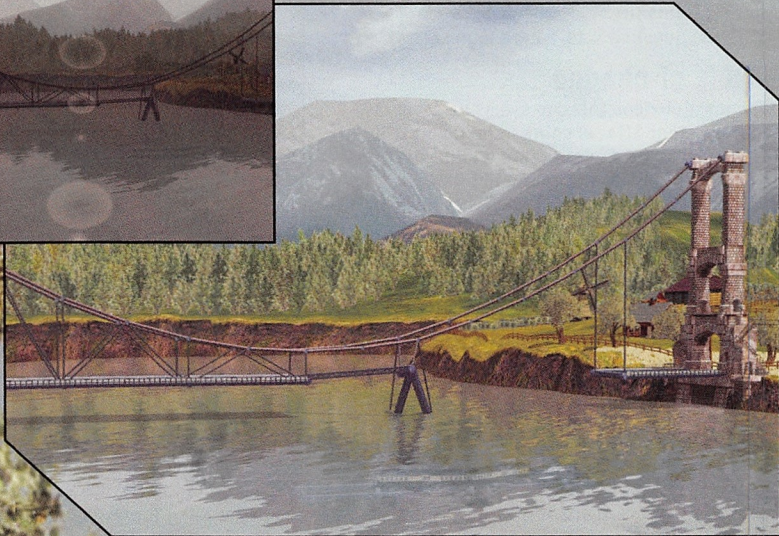
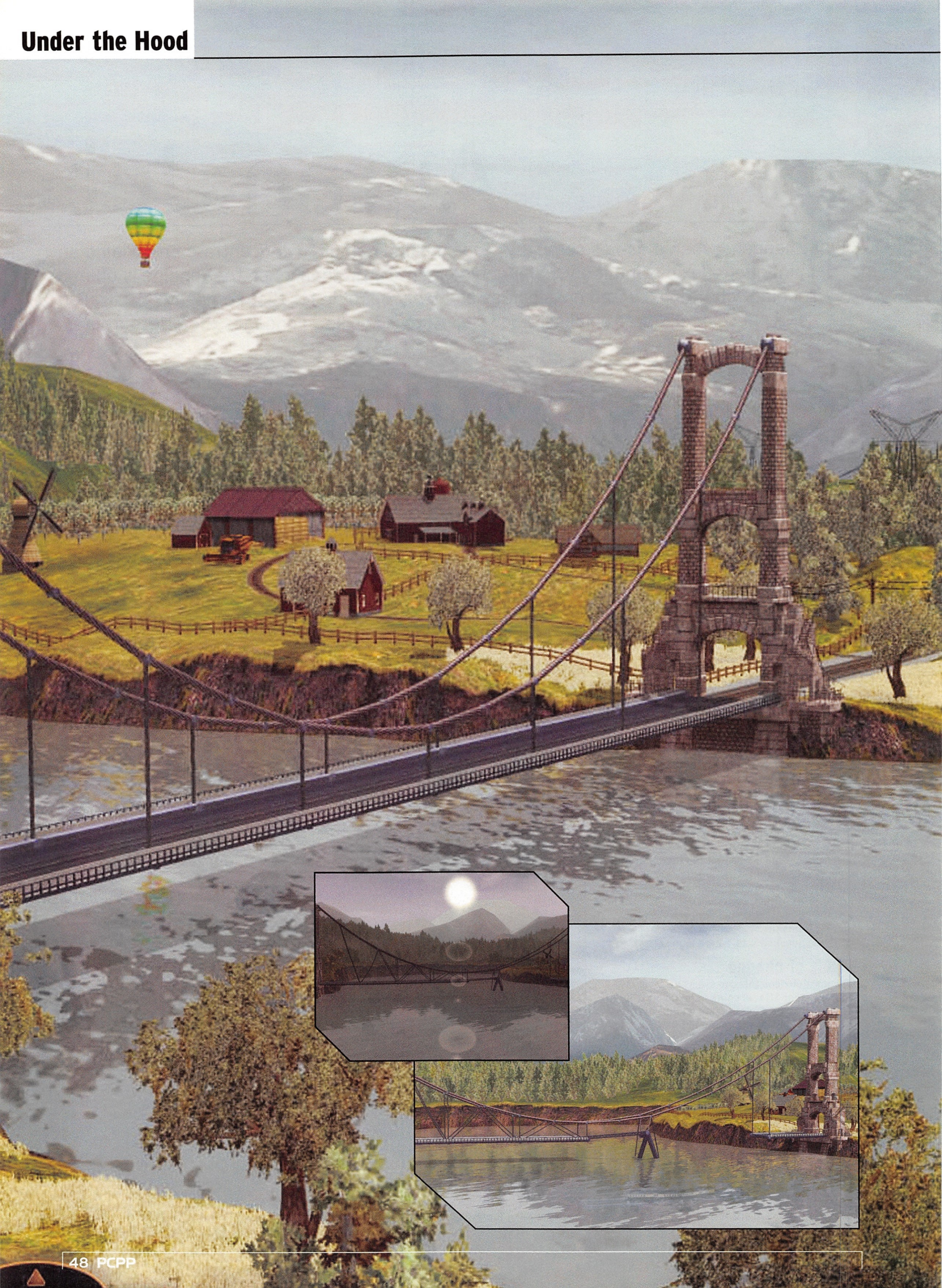
## THE COMPETITION

So what else is out there? As an aspiring game developer who wants to use a middleware program, I want to shop around. Jet's biggest competitor currently is RenderWare, produced by Criterion Software. You may not have heard of Criterion Software, but you probably have heard of GTA: Vice City, Burnout 2: Point of Impact, Pro Evolution Soccer 2 and Everquest: Shadows of Luclin.

"RenderWare's real power is its support for the consoles," says Graham Edelsten, "whereas Jet is still primarily a PC-only engine. However, it has been designed from the ground up to be ported to other environments, and we are looking closely at a Linux port right now."

And all from a small Australian company operating out of a converted wool store in Brisbane. Who'd a-thunk it?







## THE GAMES

As Auran CEO Greg Lane says, Jet's only real fault at the moment is that it lacks a 'killer app', a game with the cachet of Half-Life, Warcraft or Command & Conquer. However, that's not to say that there aren't at least a couple of interesting titles powered by Jet and available now.

### Trainz

The world's first virtual model railroad simulator. Wasn't much of a game, in the traditional sense, but allowed users to build new layouts and true to Jet and Auran's philosophy of design, it was hugely expandable. A lot of Yanks went crazy for this one, and I mean a LOT.

### TRS2004

Trainz's big brother, now packing some actual gameplay as regular gamers would recognise it, with things to do in the virtual train world. Added steam for the first time and even more expandability. Now comes packed with a very sophisticated third-party content sharing system, overseen by Auran itself. Possibly one of the only true PC game 'communities' - as opposed to a club for adolescents all hell-bent on one-upping each other in an arena of death.

### MyVirtualHome

Only a game if you like toying with your architect's hopes by designing some massive mansion and then deciding you just want a five room cottage after all. The aim with the package is to give a home buyer a 3D tour of their virtual home in less than two minutes from concept to execution. So far, they've got it down to two and a half.

### Mysterious Korean RPG

Building on Jet's success in Asia, the world capital of massively multiplayer online games - South Korea - has signed Auran up to assist in the development of a new epic. Yeah, it's based on some obscure Korean comic, probably. Yeah, it's kind of fantasy with bits of high tech thrown in. Yeah, Australians will probably never get to play it.

them reduce development costs and get games out to us quicker. But is Jet just another 3D engine with extras, or is it something different?

"The significant thing about Jet is its genre independence," says David Howell. "When you buy a game powered by the Unreal engine, most developers won't have customised it much and so it still looks like Unreal. You can tell it's been designed specifically as a shooter, and if part of your audience doesn't like Unreal, well then you have a problem."

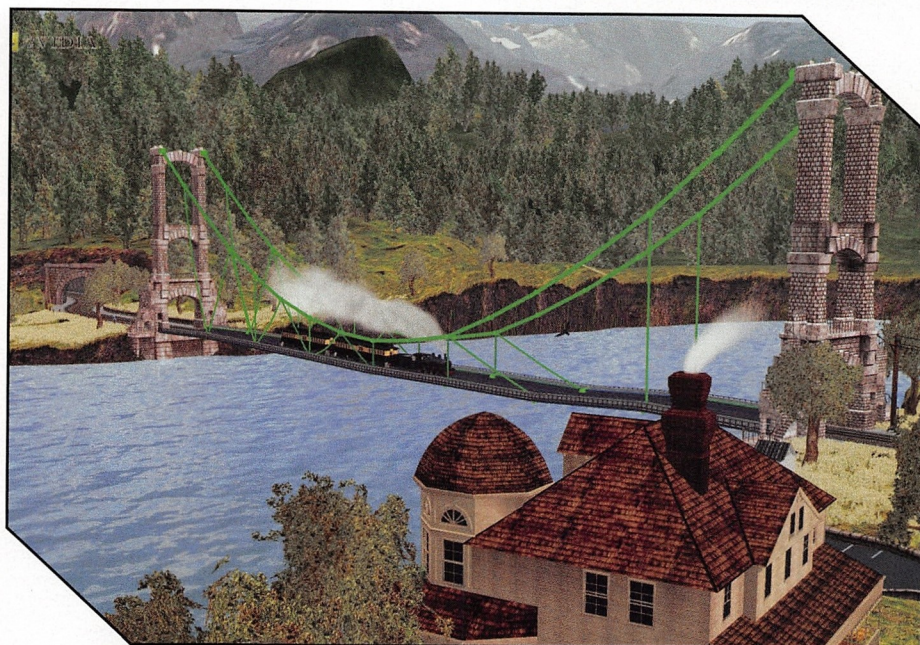
In contrast, Howell says Jet games don't automatically look like Jet games - they look like whatever the developer wants them to look like.

"Jet is a very low-level renderer. Because of that its rendered base is generic, it's neither a portal engine limited to indoor environments, nor an outdoor engine. It's not just for firstperson, and it's not just for a top-down RPG or 3D realtime strategy.

"In fact, it's not even limited to 3D," Howell continues, "because in the new version - Jet 2 - we've implement five different terrain algorithms, from the most basic which is a fixed mode like C&C Generals with no overhangs, up through top-down thirdperson like say Neverwinter Nights all the way to Tribes 2 style outdoor arenas with buildings and ultra-detailed shooters like Doom 3."

Howell is more than happy for Jet 2 to be compared to the upcoming Doom 3 engine, because he believes there is nothing Doom 3 can do that Jet 2 can't.

"Sure, Doom 3 will probably run faster doing an indoor 3D game because it's been optimised to do that, so unless the developer using Jet 2 really spends a lot of time optimising their



**"Howell is more than happy for Jet 2 to be compared to the upcoming Doom 3 engine..."**

game, you might find it runs at a lower framerate, but that's about all.

"In fact we know that our bump-mapping is more sophisticated than Doom 3's, because Doom 3 is limited to three lights, and they all have to be the same colour, while Jet 2 is limited only by the number of lights supported by the hardware, and they can be any colour."

In a world of dramatically different hardware specs on any two users' machines, Auran understands the importance of optimising code.

"Jet has been designed to allow developers to get the most out of a wide range of configurations," says Howell. "As a result it's both modular and layered from the bottom up. The layered structure means you only have to use as many of our components as you want. If you want to put in your own physics system or your own AI engine, you can do that. You can take just the core renderer and build everything else you wanted on top of it. You can even throw out the kernel, if you want, although Jet probably won't do much after that, but still, it's all part of the design philosophy."

## Books and the sequel

"The other unique thing about Jet and Jet 2 is documentation," says Howell. "As far as we know, no other engine comes with this much documentation. Every method Jet can do is documented, and there are more than 13,000 methods in the engine."

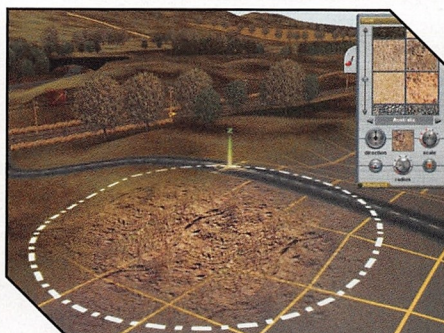
"You also get a sample racing game which includes all game assets, the source code, and a

book that takes you through the process of creating a finished product. It's really quite extraordinary documentation."

As mentioned, Auran is about to release the second iteration of Jet, called oddly enough, Jet 2. Where Jet was a DirectX 8 environment, Jet 2 adds support for DirectX 9, and all the graphical whiz-kiddery that implies.

"We've added extensions for terrain and water effects," says Howell, "and the results are really impressive. At the risk of blowing my own trumpet, the water effects in Jet 2 are the best I've ever seen."

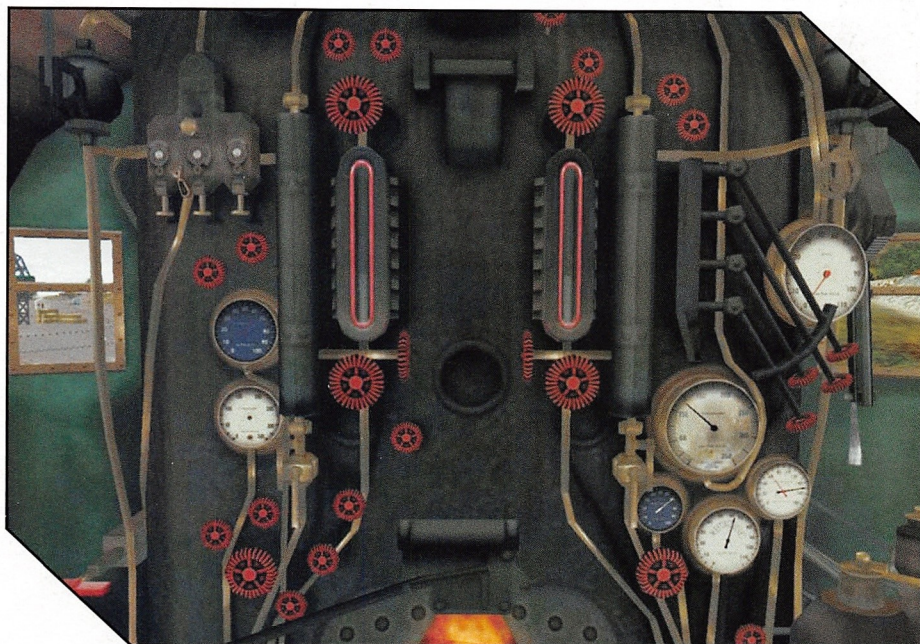
"We've also implemented a terrain rendering system called GeoShader, where we use the vertex shader found on most higher-end cards to morph terrain. The result is that we can now fly a camera at 300 frames per second over really complex terrain. Of course, once you start











**"The business sector is looking out there and seeing that games technology is cutting edge. It's leading the way in 3D visualisation."**

adding complex objects that slows down a bit, but we can deploy 10,000 tree forests and still have an engine that runs very smoothly."

But Jet 2 isn't just a renderer, it's designed to be a complete authoring environment. Howell is particularly chuffed with some of the aspects of Jet 2's networking elements.

"We put a lot of thought into our networking component, and we came up with this concept of a 'simulation mode' where you can simulate Internet conditions on a regular LAN. That is, you can get the server to randomly lose packets, have dropouts, lag spikes, basically simulate the Net and give the developer an excellent insight into how the engine is likely to react in a real online environment." As a result, this functionality has made Jet very popular in Asia, where the market for MMORPGs is considerably larger than here at home.

## THE FUTURE

David Howell, Auran's senior systems analyst, agrees that while today's hardware is pretty nice stuff, he's still keen for the march of progress to continue.

"I think the next important step that I'd like to see taken is the development of geometry chips. Today, while our massively powerful video cards are churning out textures and lights and other things, most of the actual geometry calculations are being done in software, by the computer's CPU. This means we're essentially limited to how complex our virtual worlds can be.

"For instance, our technology is at a point where high-polygon static objects are manageable but once you start animating those polys it all chugs right down. A geometry chip, dedicated to processing actual shapes and objects in the game world, would shift a lot of that work from the CPU and free up millions of cycles for better AI and other gameplay benefits."

Howell isn't sure how long it will take for such hardware to appear, but he firmly believes it's the next logical step. GeForceGEO anyone? Or is that just getting silly?

## Getting it out there

Of course, all these wonderful features aren't worth much unless there are people out in the marketplace actually using Jet to create games. Graham Edelsten is responsible for getting Jet to the masses, and in the process of his normal marketing he's discovered some unusual new opportunities for game technology developers.

"At first we thought that Jet was for game developers and we promoted it accordingly," he says. "We went to game expos, we had booths, we gave demos. It was a pretty standard marketing plan.

"However, right from the get go we also pushed the engine heavily toward educators, places like QANTM and the AIE and other unis that offer game development courses. Our thinking was that if these institutions are churning out the majority of the industry's workers, these guys would go out in the workplace and say 'Hey, I'm familiar with Jet, why don't we use that?' and this would boost our sales."

Unfortunately for Auran, they hit an immediate snag that slowed progress.

"The question everyone always asks is 'what games does it power?' and for a long time we had to answer 'well, nothing' and then after a while we had to answer 'a niche hobbyist title called Trainz'. The lack of a killer app really slowed things down."

In Auran's defence, the company did point out that Trainz had been produced in house, in 12 months, using only two programmers. It was a staggering achievement by modern development standards. But even that was not a big enough carrot for most, especially in the US.

"As I said, we were fighting that whole programmer pride thing where the in-house guys think they're going to produce the next world-beating engine themselves. We just couldn't get it through to them that 99 times out of 100 that just wasn't going to happen," says Edelsten.

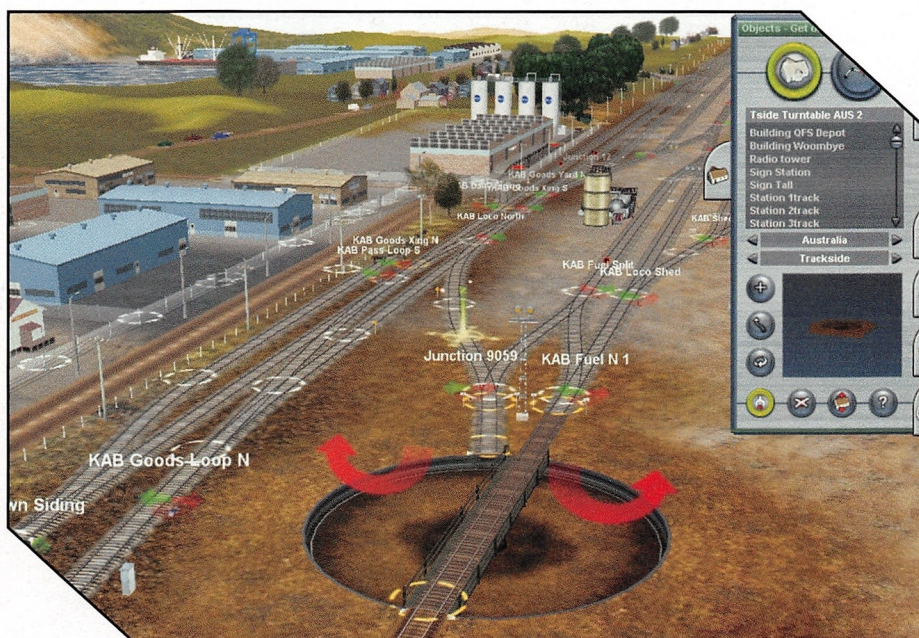
However, the situation has slowly been getting better for Auran and Jet. The company has found success in Asia where government initiatives and opening markets are creating a bigger and bigger demand for games that Asian gamers can identify with. And in South Korea, Auran has recently signed up to work on a MMORPG, using Jet.

"The thing that has really surprised us though is the non-gaming applications of Jet," says Edelsten. "We were approached by a company that asked if Jet could be used as part of an interior design package. We said sure, and the result is MyVirtualHome. It's not a game, but it uses a game engine.

"The business sector is looking out there and seeing that games technology is cutting edge. It's leading the way in 3D visualisation. So the applications for military simulations and real estate are obvious. With something like Jet, we can give a real estate company a package that can quickly provide a detailed, realistic view of what a piece of property will look like with a range of different developments on it."

Auran CEO Greg Lane agrees things are looking up, but that up has proven to be in an unexpected direction.

"The business applications of Jet and Jet 2 are exciting, but Auran will always be about games. Jet doesn't have a major killer-app style game yet, but we're hoping to change that soon." It would appear then, that we should keep watching the skies, because Jet might just come streaking onto our hard drives sooner than we think.







TECH

# High End Heaven

*It's the end of the line for both ATI and NVIDIA's high end chipsets, with the last releases of products based on these powerhouses. Asher Moses was lucky enough to have a play with both.*





## ATI RADEON 9800XT vs. NVIDIA GeForceFX 5950

**L**ooking back over the past three years in the graphics chipset industry, it's quite amazing to reflect on how far we've actually come, in terms of both revolutionary technology and the variety that we now enjoy. Once upon a time, NVIDIA had virtually free reign of the high-end graphics realm - with its main competitors, Matrox and ATI, simply unable to match the chip giant in the performance stakes and thus were content to battle it out in the OEM and mid-low end markets. Fast forward to just one year ago, and the situation has completely changed. ATI came out of nowhere with its release of the first DirectX 9 class GPU - the RADEON 9700 Pro - featuring a powerful architecture and a 256-bit memory interface that allowed it to wipe the floor with NVIDIA's GeForce4 Ti4600, signalling a new era in high-end graphics.

The significance of ATI's competition in a traditionally NVIDIA-exclusive market is two-fold. Firstly, as you are undoubtedly aware, increased competition ultimately leads to decreased prices - a clear benefit for consumers. As well as this, with each manufacturer having to compete to hold on to its market share, product cycles become shorter and more effort is put into producing a higher quality product. Again, the consumer benefits here as he/she is now able to obtain a higher performing product at a reduced price. Double bonus!

Since the 9700 Pro, the entire graphics sector has literally exploded, with both ATI and NVIDIA continually pumping out new chips in the hope of snatching the crown of market leader in time for Christmas. However, due to the fact that both are perfectly capable, relatively evenly matched manufacturers, this has resulted in the crown changing hands at least 3-4 times in the last year alone, which can become tedious for those trying to keep up with the cutting-edge.

With both NVIDIA and ATI recently releasing refresher products based on their high end chipsets, both retailing for close to the \$1000 mark, you'll naturally want to purchase the one that offers the highest performance at the lowest price. That's where we come in. With both the GeForceFX 5900 and the RADEON 9800 Pro being fairly evenly matched in our last shootout, it will certainly be quite interesting to see whether or not either of these new offerings are able to decisively snatch the performance crown, before the highly critical end of year sales begin.

### White paper whippin'

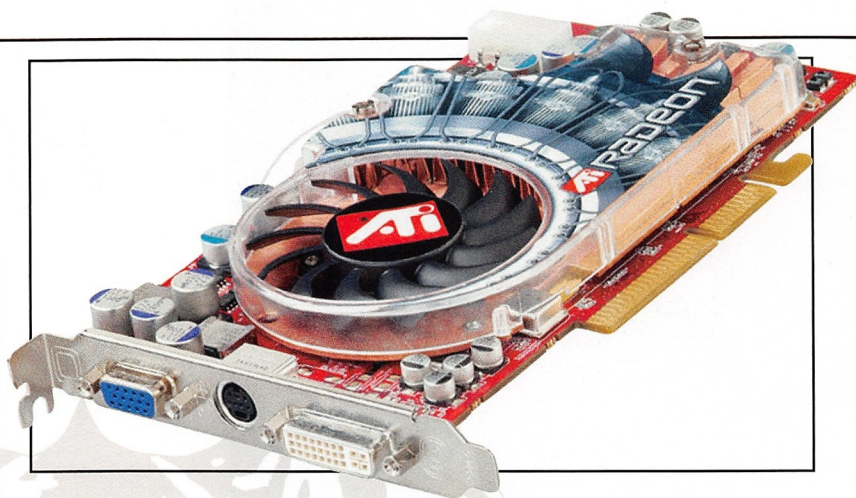
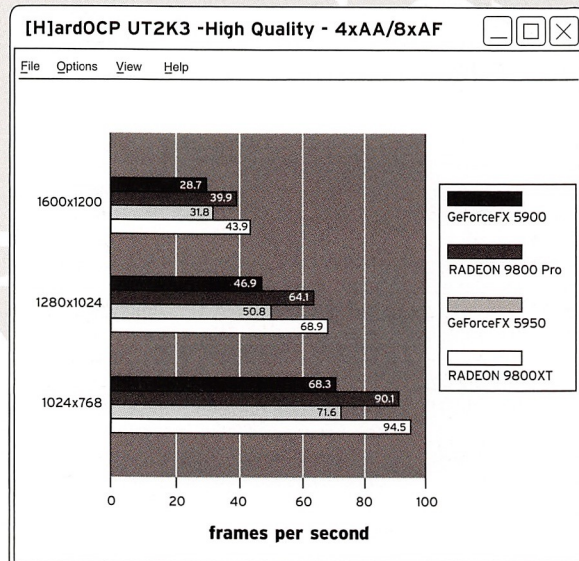
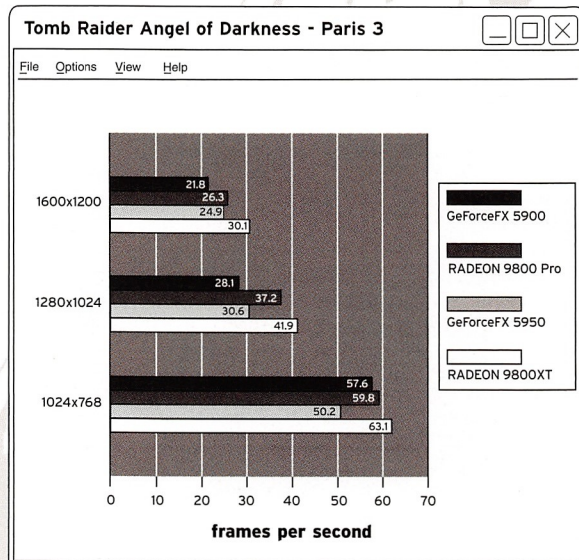
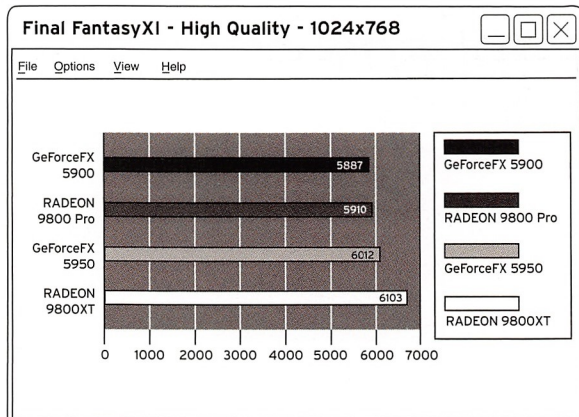
As previously mentioned, our last high-end graphics card shootout had the R9800 Pro and the GeForceFX 5900 literally neck and neck, making it quite difficult to determine a winner as far as pure performance is concerned. Predictably, both manufacturers went back to the drawing board and tweaked as much performance out of their respective GPUs as possible without having to spend the resources on designing a whole new architecture. The result? The GeForceFX 5950 and RADEON 9800XT! Thus, don't expect anything revolutionary from either of these GPUs, as, aside from clock frequencies and a few miscellaneous tweaks, little has changed.

The RADEON 9800XT has a core/memory clock speed of 412Mhz/365Mhz (the 9800 Pro runs at 380Mhz/340Mhz), while the GeForce FX 5950 runs at a frequency of 475Mhz/475Mhz (the 5900 runs at 450Mhz/425Mhz). Both of these speed increases aren't exactly significant, however they should result in some decent performance increases nonetheless, especially at high res.

As far as the GeForceFX 5950 is concerned, NVIDIA has ironed out a number of issues that plagued its 0.13-micron manufacturing process back in the days of the FX5800. As such, the "dustbuster" cooling solution is nowhere to be found and the improved thermal design has allowed for a much smaller, quieter cooler (it now takes up one PCI slot rather than two). Other improvements include a memory bandwidth of 30GB/sec, compared to the 5900 which operates at 27.2GB/sec. Whether or not this will translate into a real-world performance increase is left to be seen, nevertheless it's interesting to note that this is the highest memory bandwidth seen on a consumer graphics chipset to date. Finally, like the 5900, the 5950 boasts 256MB of memory, and, aside from the aforementioned improvements, all other aspects of the card remain unchanged.

Moving on, it was surprising to see that ATI has decided to stick with the 0.15-micron manufacturing process for the 9800XT. Similarly, the 9800XT uses the same 256-bit memory bus as the 9800 Pro, with a maximum bandwidth of 23.3GB/sec. However, despite these similarities, ATI has also decided to include a number of new features, including Hynix GDDR memory modules which are rated to run at 400MHz - perfect for overclocking. Furthermore, the chipset includes an onboard thermal diode, which,





when coupled with ATI's Catalyst drivers, automatically adjusts clock speeds based on core temperatures. While this isn't anything ground-breakingly new, the fact that ATI includes overclocking as a feature of the product means that it is under full warranty in case anything goes sour. Additionally, you'll find that most 9800XT cards are cooled by a copper heatsink/fan unit to help dispatch the excess heat produced by the 0.15-micron part, while the product also features an improved PCB layout, which ATI says is what enables the chipset to run at such high clock speeds

As far as hardware is concerned, due to the fact that these are very much high-end graphics cards, we decided to benchmark them with the highest performing gear we could get our grubby hands on at the time. After rummaging through the storeroom we ended up with a 3.2GHz (800MHz FSB) Pentium 4 processor, an Abit IS7 (i865PE) motherboard and dual sticks of 512MB OCZ DDR500 memory - can't get much better than that, folks!

Similarly, we also had to give our benchmarking suite a bit of a revamp before jumping into testing, as, evaluating

## **"the R9800XT and the FX5950 do not offer any significant performance improvements over their predecessors"**

using this aging manufacturing process in the first place.

Finally, ATI has recently informed us that they have struck a lucrative deal with Valve, stipulating that upon purchasing a 9800XT you will also receive a free copy of Half-Life 2 in the form of a coupon. This is sure to turn more than just a few heads, and certainly places the card in a commanding position as we dive into the benchmarks.

It's worth keeping in mind that both of these cards are the final products based on relatively old architectures, with brand new architectures due from both ATI and NVIDIA in the first half of next year. And instead of the incremental performance increases delivered by the 9800XT and 5950, the new architectures promise to deliver a heftier increase in performance, so the more patient readers might want to consider holding off on purchasing a new video card until we see the new wonder cards early next year.

## **The Nitty Gritty**

We tested a Sapphire RADEON 9800XT ([www.sapphiretech.com](http://www.sapphiretech.com)) and an NVIDIA reference GeForce FX 5950 ([www.nvidia.com](http://www.nvidia.com)). Coincidentally, both NVIDIA and ATI released new driver revisions just in time for the writing of this article, allowing for a completely up-to-date comparison. Specifically, we tested NVIDIA's cards with its 52.16 WHQL certified drivers, while ATI's chipsets were tested with version 3.9 of the company's Catalyst driver set. Although the Catalyst 3.9 drivers only include some minor tweaks, NVIDIA's new drivers are a result of continued efforts by the chip giant to improve its rather poor DirectX 9 Pixel Shader 2.0 performance. Fingers crossed that another major revision isn't released before this issue goes to print.

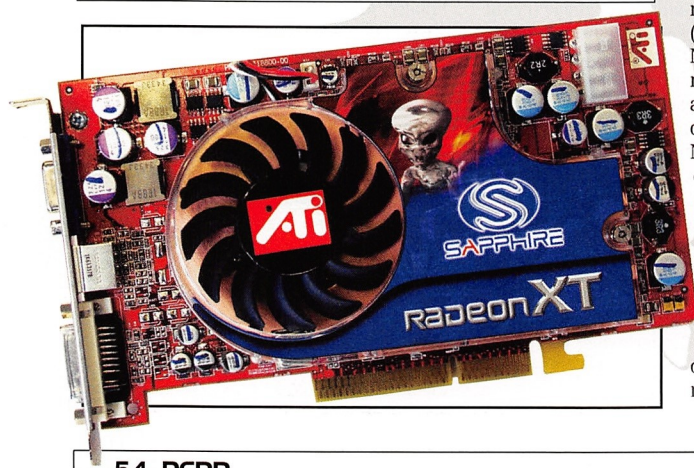
the gear using games released over six months ago wouldn't do either of these cards much justice at all. After some debate we were left with five solid, graphics intensive applications that we believe best showcase the features of each chipset. These include: Halo, Aquamark 3, Unreal Tournament 2003, Final Fantasy XI and Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness - all of which are notorious for bringing even the most decked out system to its knees.

Finally, along with the RADEON 9800XT and GeForceFX 5950, we also threw both a RADEON 9800 Pro and a GeForceFX 5900 into the mix, which should hopefully allow you to put the benchmark numbers into perspective somewhat.

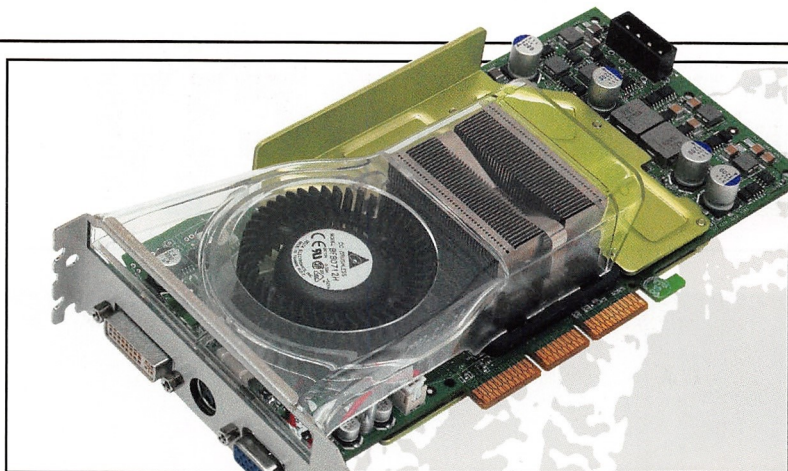
## **Start your engines**

As expected, both the R9800XT and the FX5950 do not offer any significant performance improvements over their predecessors. Thus, although it would be unfair to label these products as being superfluous, those that already own GeForceFX 5900 or RADEON 9800 Pro cards would be foolish to make the upgrade. In fact, at this point in time the older cards actually look to be slightly more attractive from a value standpoint, as the new product releases will only force the prices of these cards down.

However, having said that, the purpose of this article is to determine which of the new product releases is the most worthy of your hard earned dollars, and as far as raw performance is concerned, the R9800XT tops this area hands down. Not only does it beat out the 5950 in all tests performed, but it totally annihilates it in the tests that make heavy use of pixel shader 2.0 features, particularly Halo and Tomb Raider: AOD. Furthermore, the anti-aliasing and anisotropic filtering implementations on the 9800XT are also of a much higher







calibre as far as performance trade offs are concerned, as highlighted by our 4xAA/8xAF UT2003 tests. Thus, it is clear that NVIDIA still hasn't completely ironed out its PS 2.0 issues, which leads us to believe that what we are seeing is a hardware issue rather than a software one. Suffice to say, we'll be following this up with NVIDIA over the coming weeks and will be sure to relay our findings in due time.

## Honey, do I look phat in this?

Image quality was an aspect that we tried to focus on extensively during the writing of this article. However, due to the fact that both cards are nothing more than beefed up versions of their predecessors, our conclusions remain the same as those seen in our R9800 Pro vs. FX5900 comparisons. Nonetheless, we still spent a good 2-3 hours with each card playing through some of the newer DirectX 9 titles such as Halo, Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness and UT2003, in order to give you an accurate assessment regarding which of the two chipsets boasts the best image quality.

In regular situations with full scene anti-aliasing (FSAA) and anisotropic filtering (AF) disabled, it is literally impossible to objectively pick out any significant differences in image quality between the two cards. Both produce a superb, crisp image and, if we, as reviewers, can't find any differences when looking long and hard for over two hours, you certainly won't be able to do so whilst casually gaming.

With AA and AF enabled, however, a clear winner starts to emerge. As far as FSAA is concerned, not only does the 9800XT take less of a performance hit, but it also produces a noticeably superior image. In fact, we'd even go as far as

saying that 2xFSAA on the R9800XT is almost equivalent to 4xFSAA on the FX5950. While that's not to say that the 5950's image quality is poor, it is certainly no match for ATI's offering in this regard. On the other hand, as far as AF is concerned, there was no discernable difference between the cards, however, with both 4xAA and 8xAF enabled, we'd have to say that the image quality on the 9800XT is noticeably better overall.

## Balls to the wall

As always, our overclocking tests were conducted using the popular PowerStrip utility. In an enclosed case with stock cooling, we were able to overclock the RADEON 9800XT all the way up to 460/405MHz core/memory. At these speeds, the system was 100% stable - a very impressive feat that highlights the large headroom of Hynix's GDDR memory chips, as well as the effectiveness of the large copper HSF that has been used to cool the GPU. On the other hand, we were able to bump the FX5950 up to 515/500MHz, which is quite impressive. In either case, overclockers certainly won't be disappointed with either of these cards.

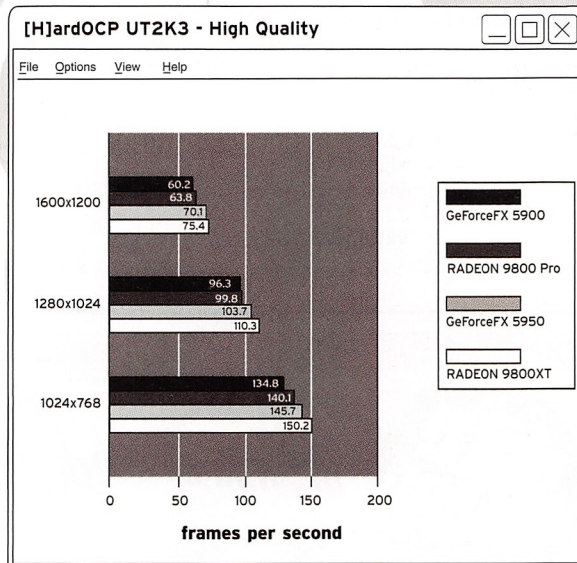
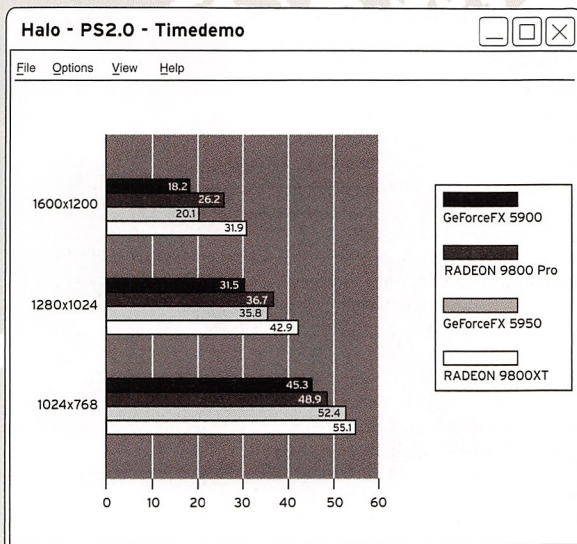
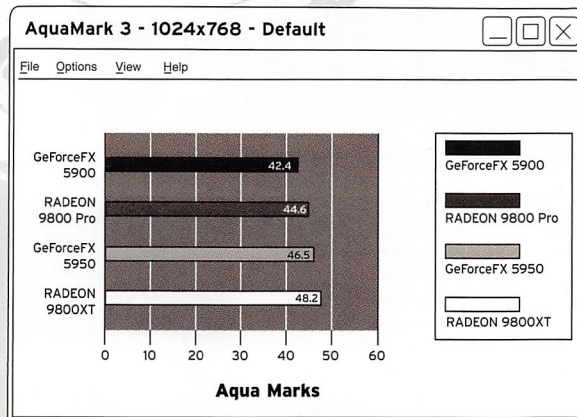
## The verdict - two thumbs up for ATI

In summation, it is clear that the RADEON 9800XT has done precisely what ATI intended it to do - remove any doubt in the consumer's mind regarding which high-end graphics chipset is the most logical purchase. While there is little reason for 5900/9800 Pro owners to fork out for an upgrade just yet, those that own older cards such as the GeForce4 Ti4600 will certainly see some noticeable performance gains, particularly in DirectX 9 applications.

As far as the GeForceFX 5950 is concerned, while its performance in most of the benchmarks conducted is quite respectable, until NVIDIA manages to iron out its Pixel Shader 2.0 issues, there is little reason to purchase a 5950 card over the far superior 9800XT. With regards to price, while at the time of writing this review neither of the cards have hit store shelves just yet, you can expect them to set you back around the same amount, as this is the case currently in the USA (\$US499 a piece).

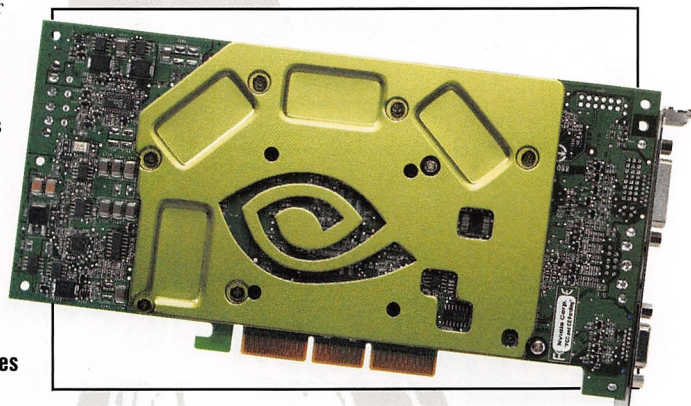
The bottom line is, with its awesome performance, excellent AA/AF implementations and a free bundled copy of Half Life 2, the RADEON 9800XT is able to convincingly retain ATI's crown as king of the high-end graphics chipset arena.

Asher Moses



### BEWARE OF THE DUST BUSTER!

While at first glance the cooler on the GeForceFX 5950 looks like a re-hash of the dreaded "dust buster" seen on the now ancient FX5800, it is actually the quietest of the lot. Rated at 34dB, the noise produced by the cooler is more likely to be drowned out by your power supply fans and any other case fans that happen to be installed in your system. In contrast, due to the fact that ATI has decided to stick with the 0.15-micron manufacturing process for the 9800XT, a slightly beefier cooling solution has been adopted. Having said that, the noise produced isn't even close to being unbearable, and thus shouldn't be a significant factor in your purchasing decisions.





# GAMES IN REVIEW

**W**e had hoped to bring you a review of Deus Ex: Invisible War this issue. Unfortunately, at the time of going to print, confusion abounds as to a) the game's present status and b) its eventual release date. I'm writing this a few days before the reported release of the playable demo, while the game itself is mooted to be on sale either early December (on the 5th or is it the 12th?), late January or even late March, depending on who you talk to.

So, sadly, all we have for you instead are five Gold Awarded games and a further two High Distinction games. Knights of the Old Republic is ample demonstration of how to successfully port a console game to PC, a transition ably assisted by developer Bioware's vast experience in the PC field. It's also the first genuinely great Star Wars game since Jedi Knight - an impressive feat when you consider just how many games we've seen set in a galaxy far, far away in the years since.

The Lords of the Rings trilogy surprised and disappointed to varying degrees. While Return of the King proves a polished hack 'n' slash fest as expected, The Hobbit is far superior to the simplistic platformer we were anticipating. Liquid's War of the Ring RTS, however, seems to suffer from not knowing who it's aimed at - the hardcore RTS freak or the casual Tolkien fan - and ends up not really doing enough to please either camp.

Personally, I'd suggest picking Prince of Persia, perhaps the best action/adventure to grace the PC in years.

**David Wildgoose**  
Editor



**57** Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

**60** Lord of the Rings: War of the Ring

**62** Lord of the Rings: Return of the King

**64** Warhammer 40K: Firewarrior

**66** Lock On: Modern Air Combat

**68** Empires: Dawn of the Modern World

**70** Pro Evolution Soccer 3

**71** Silent Hill 3

**72** URU: Ages Beyond Myst

**74** Prince of Persia: Sands of Time

**76** Hidden & Dangerous 2

**78** Wallace & Gromit: Project Zoo

**79** Age of Mythology: The Titans

**80** Patrician 3

**81** The Great Escape

**82** The Hobbit

**84** Championship Manager 4 03/04

**85** Yager

**86** CTU Marine Sharpshooter

**87** Law & Order

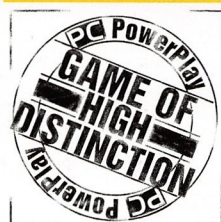
## GOLD AWARD



The ultimate accolade. A game that receives a Gold Award is an essential purchase, and the only excuse for not owning it is either not having a powerful enough PC, or not having a PC at all. Or arms. It represents a new direction in gaming, a new benchmark against which all others will be measured. It defines its genre, or creates a new one. It is gaming. You must own it.

**90+**

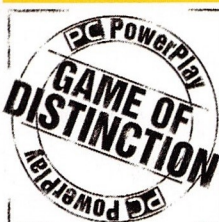
## HIGH DISTINCTION



This is the finest in gaming. A fresh concept, a perfect execution, a meaningful extension to a tried and tested format, one or all of these are required for this score. We strongly recommend the purchase of each High Distinction game, but extremely fussy gamers may want to skip those HD games that don't also receive Gold Awards.

**85-100**

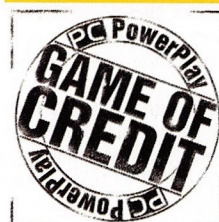
## DISTINCTION



An intriguing new concept or a bold new direction that manages to pull its new trick off with a reasonable degree of flair. You will be impressed, at either the graphics, the gameplay or some other new element that you may not have encountered before. Or perhaps this is a familiar gaming concept, but one executed so well it's almost - but not quite - an essential purchase.

**75-84**

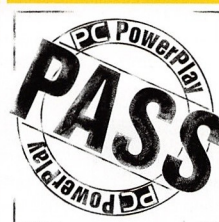
## CREDIT



Solid, playable, largely bug-free, entertaining and maybe even a bit unexpected, these are the hallmarks of a game of Credit. You may have seen it all before, but you won't mind, because a Credit game does what it says on the box - it plays well and it keeps you hooked. An essential purchase? Not necessarily, but worth consideration.

**65-74**

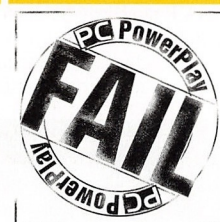
## PASS



A game that receives a pass is playable, but its concept may be flawed, its extras may be lacking or its graphical enhancements may have fallen off somewhere in a lengthy bug-fixing process. And bugs there may be, although in the end the game will, as we say, work. Purchase if you're curious, but discerning gamers will probably look for something more substantial.

**50-64**

## FAIL



There are more than 5000 games released each year. Some are gems. Some are merely unremarkable. Others are nothing more than a shameless grab for cash. Graphics will be rudimentary and gameplay will be worse. If you see someone considering a game that has failed, gently take them by the elbow and hurl them out of the shop. It's your duty as a good citizen.

**0-49**



# Star Wars Knights of the Old Republic

Why aren't your movies this good Mr Beardy?



Developer: Bioware ■ Publisher: Lucasarts ■ Distributor: EA ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

**A**fter playing the new Star Wars game, Knights of the Old Republic, two questions immediately spring to mind. The first, and maybe the most fanciful is why the people responsible for writing the plot of the game weren't signed on to do the script for any of the first three films, as their story is far more compelling than anything that Mr beardy has come up with in any of his Star Wars films and the majority of characters are more interesting to boot. Perhaps they weren't hired because they might have made Lucas look bad but it seems more likely that the end result turned out so good because Georgy-Porgy left the project well enough alone. Anyway, enough of the merciless George Lucas bashing - it's too easy to really derive any pleasure from it anyway - kind of like hand grenadeing dead fish in a barrel. Although the interface has been optimised for the PC, for all intents and purposes the game remains identical Xbox version, a fact that leads on to the second question - is the game as good as the Xbox reviews make it out to be? Ultimately the answer is no, it's not the earth-shattering work of genius that many of the online reviews make it out to be but they can be forgiven for their lack of any real objectivity - Knights of the Old Republic is far and away the best of a very limited handful of Xbox RPG titles, not

leaving much in the way of comparison and more importantly it's the first really good Star Wars game to come out in quite a while. Even more important is the fact that a Star Wars RPG has been one of those incredibly fond desires of gamers for numerous years. You really can't blame people for getting over excited when a game like Knights of the Old Republic

Dead or Alive trilogy any day. By now aside from marvelling at my remarkably good taste in films you're probably wondering what any of this has to do with the price of fish. If the plot of Knights of the Old Republic can suck in someone who thinks the whole franchise is a bit dull then you know the writers are doing something right. Set some 4000 years

## the battle animations are outstanding and a heated battle between Jedi is spectacular

comes along - it fulfils two of the fondest desires of the fans, a Star Wars RPG and a good one at that.

### Cue scrolling yellow text

Now that that uncomfortable bit of objectivity is out of the way let me just take this opportunity to say that I am not an unashamed Star Wars fanboy. Sure I like the films and will eventually get around to seeing Episode 3 before it leaves the cinemas but for me they are fairly average westerns set in space (apart from Empire which is an awesome film). Give me The Warriors, big Jim Kelly beating up a bunch of honkies of Takeshi Miike's

before the events of the first film, Knights of the Old Republic is book-ended by epic space battles. Based around one of the stories created for Dark Horse comic's Tales of the Jedi, KOTOR tells of the aftermath of the Mandalorian Wars. Although the Jedi council was reticent to lend aid in the war against the devastating Mandalorian fleet, two of the students, Revan and Malak took it upon themselves to lead a Republic fleet against the enemy. They were spectacularly successful, but instead of returning to Republic space as heroes the two Jedi led the fleet further into the unexplored Rim territories. After no word was heard for a number of years,

### SYSTEM

#### NEED

PIII 1.0GHz CPU or equivalent  
128Mb RAM  
32Mb Open GL 1.4 compatible 3D Video Card  
4Gb HDD

#### WANT

P4 1.6GHz CPU or equivalent  
256MB RAM  
62Mb Open GL 1.4 compatible 3D Video Card  
4Gb HDD

#### MULTIPLAYER

No

#### ONLINE

[www.bioware.com/games/knights\\_old\\_republic/](http://www.bioware.com/games/knights_old_republic/)  
All your KOTOR needs from forums to wallpapers taken care of in one place. Bioware really are such a caring bunch of guys.





A beach party, Star Wars style.

## MINI GAMES

Aside from the general questing and RPG tropes, *Knights of the Old Republic* features three fun little mini-games, two of which must be engaged in during the game. Swoop racing is much like pod racing from Episode 1 but the tracks are a lot simpler and the only challenger you have to worry about is the clock. Pazaak is a fun Blackjack style of game but with a face score of 20 and each player having a deck of cards that can be used to alter the score of the hand they are currently playing. The final mini game has player manning gun turrets on the Ebon Hawk shooting down Sith ships. Although this is little more than an extended cutscene it's still a bit of harmless fun.

they were thought dead. They weren't. The two Jedi found something in the Rim and returned corrupted, slaves to the dark side, with Revan as master and Malak as the less than loyal pupil.

The pair took off where the Mandalorians ended and set about conquering planet after planet with their impossibly large fleet and ever growing numbers of supporters eager to cash in on the terrible war. Eventually Revan was destroyed thanks to the efforts of a small group of Jedi led by Bastilla Shan, a young but powerful Jedi with a unique talent called Battle Meditation that can directly



influence the course of any battle. Now the master, Malak hunts endlessly for Bastilla so he can pervert her power to serve the dark side. You got all that? Good. That's just the back-story, the plot of the game is even better, as are many of the sub-quests.

## Useless meatbag

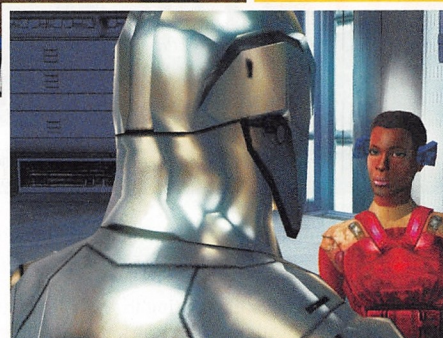
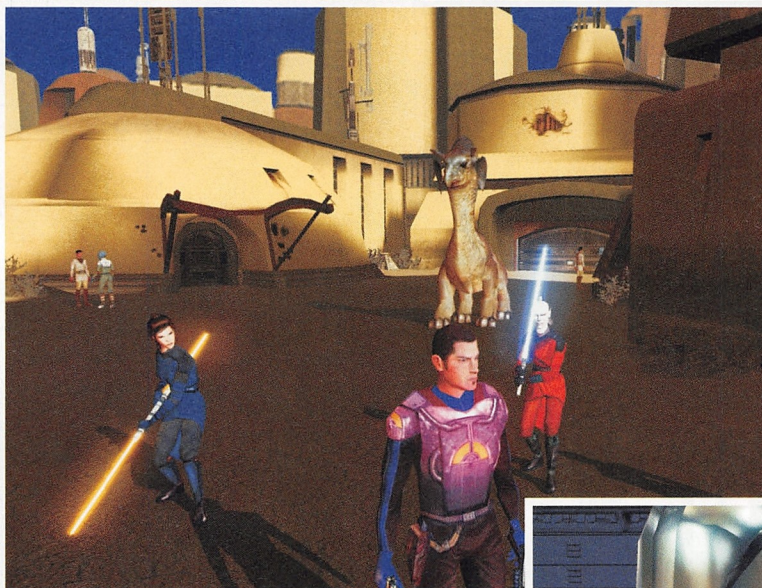
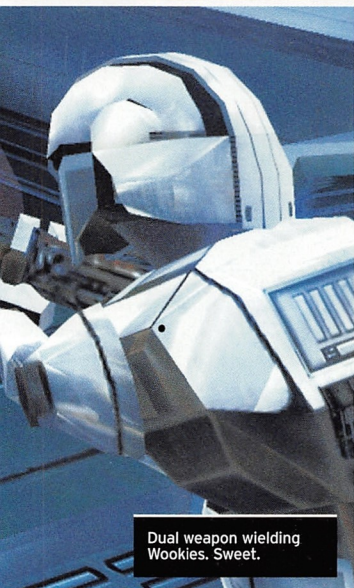
It's a bit disappointing that players only have the opportunity to make human characters, but seeming how the plot is so tight the whole way though and much of it relies on character it's a forgivable oversight. During the creation process, players have the choice of three classes - soldier, scoundrel or scout. Aside from an impressive knack for alliteration, these classes are identical to the fighter, thief and ranger classes seen in other games using the D&D d20 system. No matter what class the player chooses initially, all players will eventually graduate to becoming a Jedi.



Once the player has chosen their Jedi class (much like a prestige class in *Neverwinter Nights*) they have a new range of force sensitive feats available, as well as access to dozens of force powers ranging from protection and speed boosts all the way up to everyone's favourite, Force Lightning. Unfortunately the character creation leaves a little to be desired - although it's nice to be able to make a character with the skills to bluff their way out of any situation, the second half of the game is very combat oriented making it difficult for any character other than one totally combat oriented to complete the game.

Luckily the range of NPC characters go some distance to making the end game playable as anything other than a combat-wombat. Don't be put off by Carth and his constant "I don't trust anybody because I was betrayed" conversations. The initial member of the party is one of the most frustratingly whiny characters to grace an RPG for quite some time, but not all of the NPCs will grate on your nerves. Some of them are positively fantastic, with special





## SIX DEGREES

Some of you may be familiar of one of our old freelancers, Christian Read, the owner of an acerbic wit and desire to make people cry. Since leaving the motherly bosom of PCPP, Christian has embarked on a career in comics, including a number of stories written for Dark Horse's Star Wars Tales. If you ever wondered why Darth Maul wielded a double-ended lightsaber, wonder no longer, track down the story, "Nameless" and find out. If you go by the six degrees of separation rules about human interconnectedness it means that thanks to Christian we are only three steps away from Carrie Fisher in a chainmail bikini.

mention going to a combat droid with a penchant for gratuitous violence and calling any organic lifeform "meat bag" and a crotchety old Jedi who no longer believes in light and dark and sounds like a cranky, geriatric Morpheus who is deliberately trying to be obtuse. Much like in Bioware's Neverwinter Nights, each of the NPC characters has a deep back-story that will eventually come out through intermittent conversations.

### [insert lightsaber noise here]

Although its third-person perspective is more usually attributed to action games, KOTOR uses a turn-based combat system that allows the player to specify the way in which the game pauses the action. Players can elect to have the combat run

entirely in real-time and issue orders on the fly, or have it pause at the end of every combat round, every time a character is wounded, every time a new target is chosen or any combination of the above. The malleability of the combat system works brilliantly in KOTOR's favour and should go a long way to pleasing all but the most demanding of gamers.

To facilitate more fluid gameplay, KOTOR allows player to rack up to three actions for each of the chosen characters. The controls have been well-optimised for PC, utilising a fairly familiar WASD/mouse combo where the mouse pans the screen if it moves to the edge but otherwise can be used to manipulate objects or icons. Players can also use a mouse-look style interface that uses the right mouse button to free up a cursor to click on icons or objects.

KOTOR looks excellent thanks to some incredibly impressive environments and some equally flashy animations. Each world looks brilliant, from the sand blasted wastes of Tatooine to the lush treetop cities of Kashyyyk all are vibrantly populated with a host of characters, creatures, ruins and foliage. A long draw distance really gives the game a sense of scope, making the epic quest seem more... epic.

All of the basic character animations are excellent but KOTOR truly kicks it up a gear when the character gets their first lightsaber (or better yet, two). The battle animations are outstanding and a heated

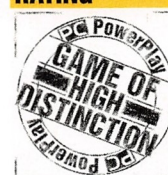
battle between two Jedi is nothing short of spectacular. Unfortunately it seems as though the texture mappers slacked off at times during development, as every now and then the usually excellent textures will fade off only to be left with dull, drab backgrounds.

Sound is taken right from the films and as such is understandably fantastic. John Williams' well-worn score is trotted out yet again to great effect and the weapon effects are just like you remember them from the films. The voice acting is good for the most part with the only real problem being that some of the characters sound a bit grating, but from their conversation paths it could simply be that they were written that way.

Although it's not the second coming of Christ like many online reviews seem to hint and it won't jostle Planescape: Torment off the perch as the best PC RPG ever, Knights of the Old Republic is a great game and there's no doubt about that. All but the most demanding of gamers should feel justified in forking out their hundred bucks.

Daniel Wilks

## RATING



### FOR

Brilliant plot  
Looks great  
Soundtrack

### AGAINST

Some imbalance  
Uneven pacing  
Endgame

### OVERALL

Finally Star Wars and RPG have met and thankfully they get along really well.

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## LIGHT OR DARK MEAT?

Through different dialogue and action options players can swing themselves to the light or dark side. Aside from giving the player a different ending, the choice between light and dark doesn't effect the overall flow of the game as much as we would like as the only real difference is that you kill a few more people and as a result get a few less missions but a bit more money. Even though that is the case most players will still want to play through the game a second time to see the alternate ending.





# War of the Ring

As we suspected, the Dark side is where all the fun happens

Developer: Liquid Entertainment ■ Publisher: Vivendi Universal ■ Distributor: Vivendi Universal ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

800Mhz CPU  
256Mb RAM  
32Mb Videocard  
750Mb HDD space

### WANT

1Ghz+  
512Mb RAM  
64Mb Videocard

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

<http://www.tolkien.society.org/>  
It's an educational charity, don't ya know

**I** magine being there on the walls of Helm's Deep, directing the forces of light in a desperate battle against overwhelming odds. It's like getting to play the Alamo but with less Mexicans, more Orcs, and slightly better odds of the guys in the fort getting out alive.

The attraction of this is balanced by the fear generated by endless exposure to crappy games made to cash-in on beloved worlds, and a quick look at War of the Ring probably won't set your mind at ease. Ah,

but don't judge so quickly, my friends.

This game is like the girl in those teen movies who is really a looker with individuality hidden under glasses and clothes that act like camouflage. In this case the glasses are the Tolkien setting and the clothes are RTS basics that are so familiar that you could almost be playing Age of Empires or Warcraft 3.

## Subtle Ways

The example of the strength and folly of this game is the subtle way that the Good army works and what they've done to the Good campaign to hide it. To allow everyone to get a handle on how this army works, Liquid decided to dumb down the default Evil AI for the campaign.

Unfortunately, this plan backfires and robs the Good army of its identity. As it stands, you can make it through using

Elven Archers with the Elven cloak upgrade. You just make sure you target the enemy's fragile detector units (the Wraith) and then these invisible marksmen make short work of everything else. It's only when you hit a difficulty level where this doesn't work (like in the hard setting, Skirmish maps or multiplayer) that you start to see the potential of the light side.

The Wraiths start hiding in well-guarded towers which make you itch for Dwarven Axe Throwers to bring them down but, since they're not invisible, they'll be overrun by the numbers of darkness, so you'll want to bring in the Bear-men as shields, but since they're also your healers you'll want to bring Light Bearers to protect them with their hit point shield and so on. Your Shield Breaker troops are decent fighters but their real strength is that they weaken enemy armour, letting others get in damage, and your Huron tree-dudes can sacrifice the ability to move to root themselves down and entangle foes. In most games a unit's special ability just helps it – in WoTR the Good units have abilities that help everyone around it. Mixed troop-types don't cut it alone; you have to have your units co-operate to get places in this game.

The dynamic works really well to give you something a little different that fits perfectly with the philosophy behind Tolkien. My only concern is that this co-

## THE TWIST OF FATE

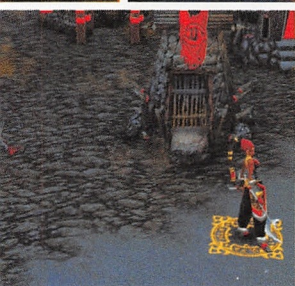
War of the Ring adds a new dimension to its RTS in the form of Fate points. They are one part mana and one part experience. As your side kicks its enemies to the curb it gains these points. Once you have them the fun begins. You can use them for boring things like unlocking special powers for heroes or having them raised from the dead, but the global spells are where it's at. You can blind every enemy on the screen for a few seconds, make every arrow fired in a radius send people flying, slow troop movement, drop a black obelisk to heal the evil or, if you watch your pennies, even summon a Balrog or Ancient Trent that shakes the earth with every step.





## HERO MANAGEMENT

If you've read the books you'll know that this is going to be a game of heroes. Heroes are central to the plot of Lord of the Rings and they turn the tide of battle in this game. Generally, it not because they have huge damage stats or armour, rather it's their special abilities that set them apart. For example, Gimli can also pound the ground with Durin's strike and stun all nearby enemies. Alone this just slows enemy troops down for about four seconds but with some support it can devastate entire raiding parties. Yes, you can play Frodo and yes, he can use the ring, but that's what the Ring Wraiths want – one of their hero powers is wasted otherwise.



"Which joker taped this square to my shoes?"



"Last one inside the tent sleeps next to Osric!"

dependence could limit strategies a little in the long term.

The way the Good side works isn't the only hidden innovation. Out of the list of new little features a couple need to be mentioned, one for strategy and the other for pure fun. They are places of power and knock back.

Places of power give your army a hefty boost so long as you control them, like increasing the maximum hit points of your every unit or bumping up your armour or regeneration. This has some huge tactical implications especially in multiplayer games. Is it better to tackle the enemy base or try clean out the well-defended and chunky stat boost? It's a deceptively important new dynamic.

The addition of knock back means that certain special attacks can send enemies flying directly away from the attacker. It makes it hard for melee units to connect, can give archers a breather and is handy for sending foes plunging off walls. Imagine an Uruk-hai sending an elf flying with a shot from his massive bow and you get the idea.

## Blunt Means

If Uruk-hai appeal to you or you're looking for a less hand-holding style of play, then the Dark side is for you. Its units are

cheaper than the Good equivalent; they generally move faster and work well in unsupported strike forces. What's more, evil has access to the equivalent of real siege weapons... it doesn't have to rely on overlapping effects to get the job done. The campaign is more challenging too.

For both sides the missions are pretty well laid out, with new objectives popping up, and some great set-pieces like chasing Gollum through Mirkwood Forrest, the siege of Helm's Deep and the battle at the Bridge of Osgiliath which involves you freaking out at the sight of a new breed of day-Troll and having to hurry workers into the frontline to drop the bridge and cut off their attack.

The feel of the characters and the missions are captured fairly well, but the campaign mode could have been more. I know that Liquid planned to have researched items carry between missions so that you had a feel of your side steadily advancing. As it stands, you're whisked between battles with only the odd recurring hero to map your progress.

Other than extensive whisking, the game also features strong multiplayer and skirmish options that include Famine maps (where food is so hard to come by that you feel every loss) and new game types like Catapult where you race to find, protect

and build a massive catapult which can devastate a settlement in about fifteen seconds. It's a lot of fun with friends or alone ... the AI doesn't pull punches here.

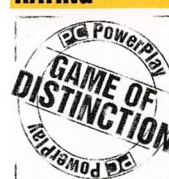
## Ring Tone

Across the board, the RTS mechanics are very solid, with only the rare flaw. The zoom could have gone out a little further and the epic heroes seem a tad too powerful and can be relied on to sway battles, especially in the Good campaign. This hides what the game has to offer even deeper. You could argue that the population cap could have been higher and a couple more units would have been nice, but if there are any real problems with the game, it comes from being bound to vast rules and lore of Tolkien. There were only really two sides in the books so there are only two sides here. There were no real siege weapons in the books, so there are only trolls slinging rocks here. Furthermore, when you need to have scattered and historic battles, mentioned in four epic books and spanning thousands of years, it's hard to keep your RTS from feeling a little disjointed.

While War of the Ring doesn't match the showmanship of your Warcraft 3s, it is far more than your usual license cash-in. This could be the perfect introduction to RTS for Tolkien fans new to the genre, while offering veterans a solid game which includes a crack at Helm's Deep.

Timothy C. Best

## RATING



**FOR**  
Legolas and Gimli  
Subtle Innovation  
Strong Skirmish  
mode

**AGAINST**  
Tolkienian  
Limitations  
No Oliphaunts

**OVERALL**  
A solid stab at  
Tolkien real-time  
strategy

**76**





# Lord of the Rings The Return of the King

The King is here and he's not Elvis

Developer: EA Publisher: EA ■ Distributor: EA ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M 15+ ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

PIII 500MHz or  
equivalent CPU  
128Mb RAM  
32Mb 3D Video Card  
2Gb HDD

### WANT

P4 1.0GHz or  
equivalent CPU  
256Mb RAM  
64Mb 3D Video Card  
2Gb HDD

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

[www.eolasaid.com/  
misc/vsd/index.html](http://www.eolasaid.com/misc/vsd/index.html)  
Funniest fan fiction  
ever, the secret  
diaries of all the  
main characters,  
and some not so  
important ones from  
the first two films of  
the trilogy. As  
Aragorn puts it, "Is  
everyone in this  
movie gay but me?  
Actually, not too sure  
about me either."

**L**ike last year's console-only Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers, Return of the King is the official Tolkien game to be licensed from the movie of the same name, liberally using the epic score, actors and events from the final part of the trilogy. The end result is something like a modern day version of Golden Axe, with players taking the role of one of the characters from the movie and hacking their way to victory in three separate but intertwined story arcs taken straight from the source material.

Actually kicking off with some of the events at the end of the second movie, Return of the King allows players to choose between three story arcs. The Path of the Wizard sees Gandalf the White, the most powerful character in the game, fighting his way to a final confrontation with the forces of darkness. Memorably, we see

Gandalf simultaneously trying to avoid the angry thrashings of war-bound Ents whilst trying to kill enough approaching orcs, goblins and Uruk-Hai to allow him to progress to the next level. The Path of the Warrior pits the three companions, Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli against all manner of foes including the King of the Dead, trolls and massive siege engines on their way to a final battle against an enemy who could best be described as Sauron's PR agent. The final path, the Path of the Hobbit is both the most difficult and interesting with players initially taking the role of the stalwart Samwise Gamgee and later the ring-bearer himself, Frodo Baggins. Although neither of the half-pint heroes are really warrior material to begin with, after a bit of levelling up they become surprisingly tough - a knee-high force to be reckoned with.

## You have my sword...

Although rendered with a very impressive graphics engine and imbued with an excellent plot and soundtrack, The Return of the King is a hack and slash game at heart and as such the player's enjoyment of the title hinges on the strength of the fighting engine. To put it bluntly, Return of the King has an absolutely fantastic fighting engine, although the true greatness only appears about half way through the game, after players have had a chance to level up some characters and spend their experience on new combos and abilities.

Initially players only have access to four simple attacks: quick, physical (some form of kick or push), heavy (good for breaking shields) and ranged, as well as a finishing blow to kill grounded enemies and a parry. Quick attacks can be linked





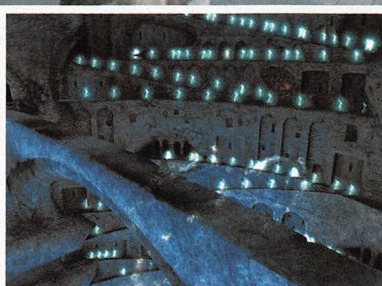


Bennett. Looking in a mirror. Yesterday.



## MY PRECIOUS

Aside from having a deep fighting engine and soundtrack, *Return of the King* features some amazing footage from the last two movies of the trilogy as well as a wealth of unlockable DVD style special features such as interviews with the cast of the film talking about the voice acting experience, a quite amusing featurette showing the *Hobbit* actors talking about gaming and quite a few more. *RotK* also features a number of unlockable characters ranging from Frodo to Isildur just to add to the replayability of the title.



into a simple button mashing three hit combo, but after playing for a while the system really opens up, delivering a far deeper fighting experience than expected.

Much like a role-playing game, *Return of the King* rewards the player with experience after each kill and levels up the player after they reach a certain XP threshold, opening up new skills and abilities to buy. Between levels the player can spend the accumulated experience to buy more advanced combos, special abilities, extra health or the like. The fighting engine gets more absorbing the more you play due to the new combos that allow for quick kills of certain types of enemy, area effect damage or stunning blows.

However, the real genius comes from the fact that the player doesn't actually have to go through the sometimes laborious early process of getting combos for all characters. When purchasing

abilities, all but the character specific skills, such as magic for Gandalf or *Hobbit* cloaks for Sam and Frodo can be purchased for all applicable characters for a higher price, meaning that every character you choose from then on has the skills you have already purchased.

Although it is possible to play *The Return of the King* using a keyboard/mouse configuration it's really not the preferred control method as in reality there are just too many keys needed to make it a feasible exercise with four direction keys, four attacks, finishing move, special ability, ranged weapon, dodge, block and a few more on top of that. Get yourself a good gamepad and you won't regret it.

## Damn the cinematographer

Although the vast majority of the level design is excellent, there is one ever-present problem that can often cause a

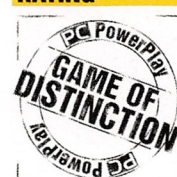
good deal of frustration. The graphics engine supports what can only be described as cinematic camera angles, which do admittedly look great, but there are many occasions where these angles are more problem than pretty.

The escape after defeating the King of the Dead is a prime example of the problem as your character often runs straight towards the camera, thereby not being able to see the enemies laying in wait, allowing them to get in a few free hits before you even have a chance to react.

Aside from the frustrating camera angles, the engine is excellent. Though it will definitely give your system a serious workout if you try and set the resolution high with the details dialed up. The engine supports a huge number of enemies on screen at once with a barely noticeable drop in framerate. It also supports some brilliant particle effects leading to some truly spectacular spells and explosions. The less said about the soundtrack and effects the better. Not because they're bad - far from it - the soundtrack, sound effects and voice acting are so good that to say anything other than wow would do them a disservice. The soundtrack for the game comes direct from the film and even carries with it a THX certification and the actors from the movie perform all the voice acting. What more could you want?

Daniel Wilks

## RATING



## FOR

Deep fighting  
Soundtrack  
Unlockables

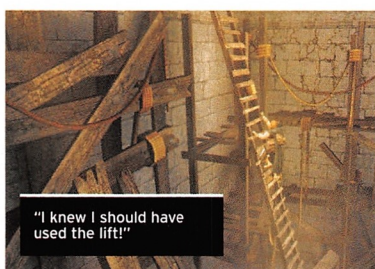
## AGAINST

Camera  
Frustrating  
PC Controls

## OVERALL

It may be just a hack and slash game at heart but *Return of the King* is still a worthy addition to the Tolkien estate.

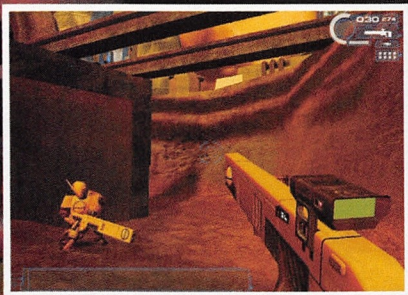
# 83



"I knew I should have used the lift!"







# Fire Warrior

As a gamer I demand vengeance

Developer: Kuju ■ Publisher: THQ Distributor: THQ ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

P3-667  
128MB RAM  
64MB Videocard  
1GB HDD

### WANT

P4-2GHz+  
256MB RAM  
GeForceFX  
1GB HDD

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

[www.magical-tricks.com/FireMagic2.html](http://www.magical-tricks.com/FireMagic2.html)  
Magic just isn't fun unless it's dangerous. Try a few of these fire tricks on your granny.

## RATING



### OVERALL

Truly, unmistakably awful

23

**L**et me recount my first experience of playing this game: my 'Tau fire warrior' was dropped into an Imperial stronghold. I ran through endless identical trenches past endless identical blown-up tanks shooting identical gaudily-coloured Imperial soldiers. I found the blue key. I found the orange key. I penetrated the bunker. I ran up to a shelf with some grenades on it and got permanently stuck between two immovable boxes. I rested my forehead gently on my keyboard and whimpered.

The reason I whimpered was because in a fair world, at that point I would have been allowed to remove the Fire Warrior CD from my CD-ROM, nail it to a frisbee, and fling it from the topmost floor of the Redfern TNT towers. But no, I had to keep playing the damn thing on the off chance that it turned out to be a good game after all and deserved a decent score.

## Bad start

It's funny, but when a game has level design that lets you get stuck between two boxes half an hour into the first map, it rarely seems to get much better from there. In the case of Fire Warrior, its crapulence is not immediately understandable. It's a Games Workshop

licensed Warhammer 40,000 game, set in that famous 41st Millennium in which, apparently, there is only war. A global community of dedicated nerds spend millions of combined hours painting thousand of different kinds of miniatures in the table-top version of this game, and each miniature has an intricate backstory. There are literally volumes and volumes of possible inspiration for a Warhammer 40K game, and Kuju has ignored every single one of them.

## this is easily the worst shooter for the PC since the mighty Daikatana



It's a licensed title. It has the Games Workshop stamp of approval. And yet, it doesn't feel like Warhammer 40K. It's not dark. It's not menacingly gothic. The imperial soldiers are dressed variously in bright red and bright blue costumes.

And the graphics! In this regard, Fire Warrior can only be described as a retro title; it's like something from 1998. Low polygon characters, low polygon environments, low detailed textures, it's just low. The screenshots on the back of the box look quite inviting, but the reality of the game is one of crushing disappointment.

## Bad finish

Seriously though, this is easily the worst shooter for the PC since the mighty Daikatana. This makes the Halo port look like Half Life 2. Fire Warrior has been shunted across from the mighty PlayStation2 and it carries with it some of the more grating shortcomings of Sony's console.

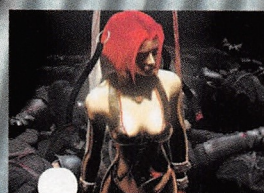
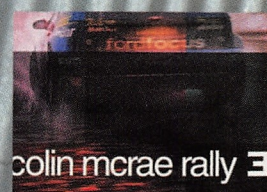
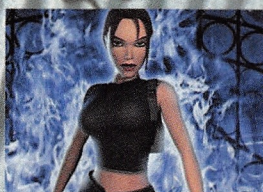
There's no save system, you just progress, dirge-like, through a linear level being "checkpointed" from time to time. The weapons are unutterably crap. By the time you get stuck on badly designed level geometry - and believe me, you will - and figure out that you don't have enough grenades to kill yourself, your only menu option will be to restart the level. Do you want to spend another fifteen minutes in a shooting gallery full of day-glo harlequins? Or would you rather play frisbee?

The sound is just awful - tinny gunshots, muted explosions and intermittent speech. For instance on one of my machines, my Tau brethren had moving lips, but no sound came out. Maybe they used telepathy. Who cares.

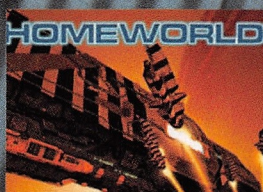
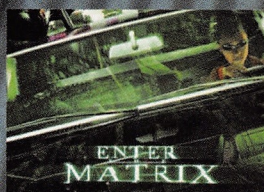
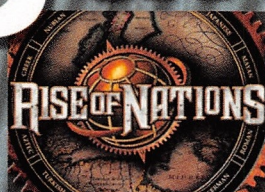
Fire Warrior has absolutely no saving graces. There is no reason to go anywhere near this game. Warhammer 40K aficionados will hate its merciless rape and pillage of their beloved universe. The rest of us will get more out of THQ's other travesty, Red Faction 2.

Anthony Fordham





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# Lock On: Modern Air Combat

Bennett Ring felt the need, the need for speed.

Developer: Eagle Dynamics ■ Publisher: Ubi Soft ■ Distributor: Ubi Soft ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

800MHz CPU (yeah right!)  
256MB memory  
DX8.1 video card

### WANT

6GHz CPU  
2GB memory  
RADEON 10000

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

To chat with some of the most anal gamers around, head to the forums at [www.lo:mac.com](http://www.lo:mac.com)

I hate to say it, being the virtual fighter jock that I am, but the flight sim genre is a dying breed. It simply takes far too much hard work and research to please the small pool of gamers who purchase hardcore simulations. As a result simmers have had to make do with a rapidly shrinking number of sim releases to play each year. In fact, the last big modern combat flight sim release before LO:MAC was Falcon 4, which is almost as old as my wardrobe. Yes, that old. So you can imagine the anticipation amongst avid flight sim fans for LO:MAC, especially considering it's being developed by the same crazy Russians behind the seminal Flanker series.

Unlike the Flanker series, LO:MAC is a survey sim, meaning it models more than one flyable aircraft. There are actually seven flyable aircraft in total – no small

feat considering the attention to detail present for each.

On the NATO front we have the awe inspiring A-10 Tank Killer, which is basically an aircraft built around a massive rotary 30mm tank busting gun, as well as the lethal F-15C Eagle, an aircraft that has never been shot down by another aircraft in combat. On the flip side of the coin are the Russki air frames, covering the SU-25 Frogfoot, the Soviet answer to the A-10, and a swag of fighters including the Mig-29S, Su-27 and the Su-33. Finally, two variants of the Mig-29A are also included, the German and Russian versions, but the difference in these boils down mainly to the avionics. As you can see the selection is biased towards Russian aircraft, which isn't surprising considering the origins of the developers. Whether or not this is a

problem all boils down to personal taste, but I'd imagine most western world simmers would have similar tastes to mine, preferring to focus on the A-10 and F-15.

Surprisingly absent are any aircraft which utilise an Air To Ground radar, such as the F/A-18C. Obviously the developers didn't have the time to code this alongside the complexities of the Air To Air radar, although an F/A-18 expansion pack is already in the works to rectify this.

The question that has been on the lips of simmers since the release of the LO:MAC demo is one of frame rates. One of the biggest problems with Falcon 4 was its woeful frame rates in the campaign mode, and I'm sorry to say that LO:MAC's performance isn't much better. I tested the game on a 3.3GHz Pentium 4, with 1GB of DDR 433 RAM and a RADEON 9800XT,



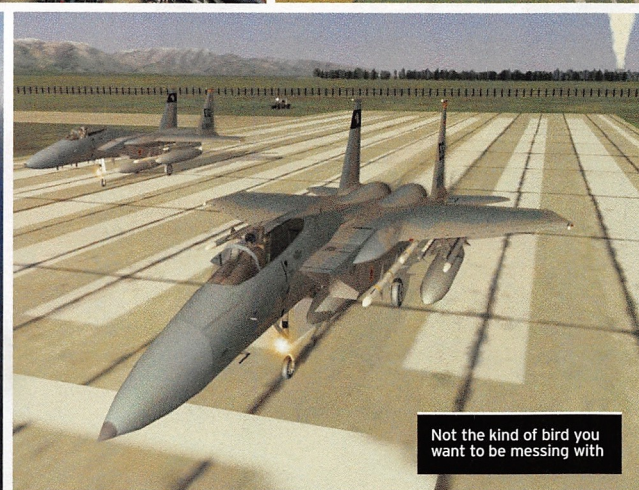
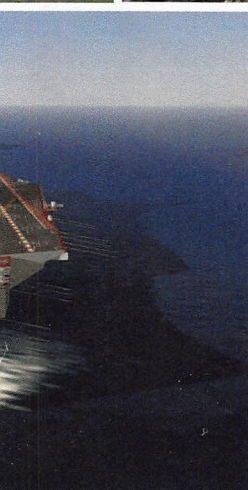




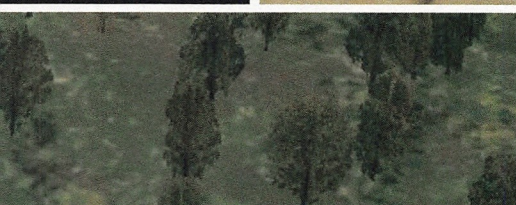
Gravity doesn't exist if you've got twin engines

## MANUAL NOT INCLUDED

LO:MAC only ships with a flimsy manual, while the real manual is a 135 page .pdf file. An enterprising printer in the UK has permission from Ubi Soft to sell this manual in a swanky faux leather case, with a stack of additional content to boot, bringing the page count up to 300 pages. This perfect Christmas present for the aviation geek in your life is available from [www.lomac-manual.com](http://www.lomac-manual.com)



Not the kind of bird you want to be messing with



with most image quality settings set to medium. And during the campaign, it was quite common to see the frame rates plummet below 20fps. Thankfully for the majority of the game the frame rate hovered around 30 frames and above, but those with mid level machines or worse are going to feel the hurt. We'd go so far as to say that it's going to take another year or two before hardware catches up with the demanding engine that drives LO:MAC.

which themselves are modelled to an incredible degree of detail. You'll be flying these gorgeous jets through the most realistic terrain yet seen in a flight sim, right down to the modelling of individual trees in massive forests. Weapon effects are equally impressive, with gorgeous smoke and explosion effects. It's just a pity that most of you aren't going to see these effects the way they were meant to be seen until you fork out for an upgrade.

The physics engine in LO:MAC is up to the high standards set by the Flanker series, with each aircraft handling just the way it's technical specifications suggest. Compared to the likes of IL2, you'll probably find these aircraft much simpler to handle, although the dreaded flat spin is a total and utter bitch to get out of. So when that AoA warning starts going off,



airframe, although the non-interactive nature of these makes them quite tedious.

As expected, the obligatory campaign mode is present, with four separate campaigns based around various aircraft. It's not dynamic, but there's enough going on to make it feel like you're playing a part in a much larger battle. There are also a stack of single player missions, and we're happy to report that the multiplayer experience is simply brilliant. We only flew with two people, and the interface was an unintuitive nightmare, but once we were in the game it was obvious that multiplayer is going to be extremely popular, especially considering there was no lag. Bug wise we're happy to report that LO:MAC has arrived in a relatively bug free state. We say relatively, as hardcore flight sims are renowned for having more bugs than a cheap motel room, so we were happy to see only a few crashes to desktop, as well as the rare occasions when the AI lost the plot.

While LO:MAC is a little rough around the edges, and has hardware requirements that could make a Cray supercomputer blush, there's no denying that we've got a new benchmark for modern combat flight sims. It's not quite up to the standard of IL2: Forgotten Battles, but give it a patch or six and an increase in PC computing power, and it won't be far off.

Bennett Ring

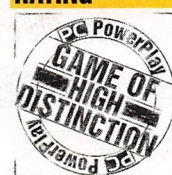
## It's no exaggeration to say that LO:MAC is easily the finest looking sim to ever hit the PC...

However, the single missions and multiplayer missions have far less going on in them, and thus tend to run much more smoothly, so those who are only interested in shooting down their pals should still be able to play the game smoothly enough. One of the biggest frame rate killers are overcast clouds - we're praying for a patch that allows the user to remove these.

But boy does it look good. It's no exaggeration to say that LO:MAC is easily the finest looking sim to ever hit the PC, even when the graphics options are at the medium levels. DirectX 8.1 pixel shader effects have been used on both the water and jet exhausts, and these are simply breathtaking in their realism. Self shadowing is also present on the jets,

it's time to pull out of that Cobra manoeuvre you were in the middle of (yes, the Cobra is possible!). If you're looking for the same level of fidelity in the avionics and aircraft systems of LO:MAC as those seen in Falcon 4, look elsewhere. They're by no means simple, but they're not quite as anal as Falcon 4. However, when set to their highest difficulty, it will still take you months to master the various avionic suites on offer; after a week of flying the F-15 I still found it very hard to get a long range lock. While LO:MAC definitely caters to the hardcore gamer, the wealth of difficulty options available can turn it into an arcade game. The inclusion of over 20 training missions also goes a long way to helping you become one with your chosen

## RATING



### FOR

Stunning visuals  
Excellent physics  
and avionics  
Scalable for the noobs

### AGAINST

Extreme hardware  
requirements  
No air to ground  
radar  
A few bugs

### OVERALL

While the hardware requirements are disappointing, any self respecting simmer needs this game. And thanks to the difficulty scalability, novices to the genre with an interest in modern military aviation should also find something to enjoy.

# 88





# Empires Dawn of the Modern World

Rick Goodman is the nicest game developer in the world

Developer: Stainless Steel ■ Publisher: Activision ■ Distributor: Activision ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

PIII 600Mhz  
128MB RAM  
32MB DirectX  
Video Card  
900MB HDD

### WANT

PIII 1Ghz  
256MB RAM  
64MB DirectX  
Video Card

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

Right, Des, that's it,  
next time you fill in  
the online box...  
or else!

**T**he original Empire Earth was an audacious title that tried to cover just about everything in human history. It didn't quite succeed, as its awesome breadth came at the price of limited depth and some significant design compromises. Even so, Empire Earth sparked a renewed interest in RTS games and offered some new directions for an increasingly tired genre. Empires: Dawn of the Modern World is a little less ambitious than its predecessor, but developer Stainless Steel has learnt from its earlier experience and produced a solid title that deserves to be considered as more than a simple sequel.

Empires' scope is a mere blip on the radar this time around, spanning just a thousand years of history and seven major civilisations (nine if you count earlier versions). Players can choose between a nicely constructed skirmish mode, three single player campaigns and multiplayer for up to seven players via LAN or Internet. Tutorials are missing for some reason, but an editor has been included and the basic gameplay elements are quite straightforward. It's a good mix that brings decent replay value and sufficient opportunities to develop tactics for each civilisation.

Stainless Steel has done a terrific job of balancing the civilisations, with each boasting unique characteristics and

capabilities. Each has national economic and military powers, and all are working on their own secret technological advances. The Germans, for example, don't need houses to expand their population and can rely on the security offered by the Enigma Machine, while the British can always fall back on the Black Death and the Royal Geological Society! The approach works very well during the campaigns, avoiding the superficial feel national characteristics bring to most RTS titles, and clever players will adjust their tactics accordingly.

supported by a basic storyline and a stack of (occasionally ponderous) cut scenes. They're well designed as a whole, and players will be pleased with the sub-plots that run through them.

Stainless Steel has shifted the focus towards action rather than resource gathering, but RTS veterans will be happy enough with the game's resource aspects. Iron is gone as a resource, which simplifies things a little, but taking control of mines and food supplies remains important in most scenarios - particularly since advancement through the ages depends

**unit mix is a major strength and the decision to limit the role of research means exciting variants are available from the start**

## No iron in sight

Empires brings three campaigns, the missions from which can be replayed at any time. Players can choose between Richard the Lionheart's war against the French (and his brother) in medieval times; General Yi as he takes on the Chinese in the age of gunpowder; or General Patton as he slaps a few bed-ridden soldiers around and tackles the Reich across Africa and into Germany during WWII. Each campaign is

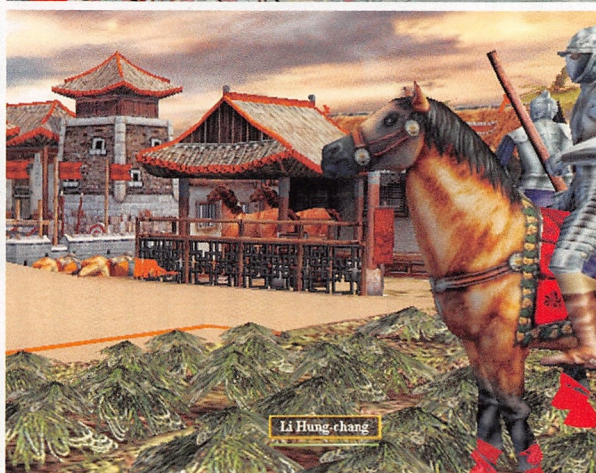
primarily on wealth rather than research. Lovers of micromanagement will be a little disappointed with the generally self-directed nature of the workforce, and the odd path finding AI glitch means that things can get out of hand over time. That said, the balance between economic management and action feels about right.

The missions themselves are a reasonable mix of resource driven scenarios and more direct combat objectives. Things start off slowly in all

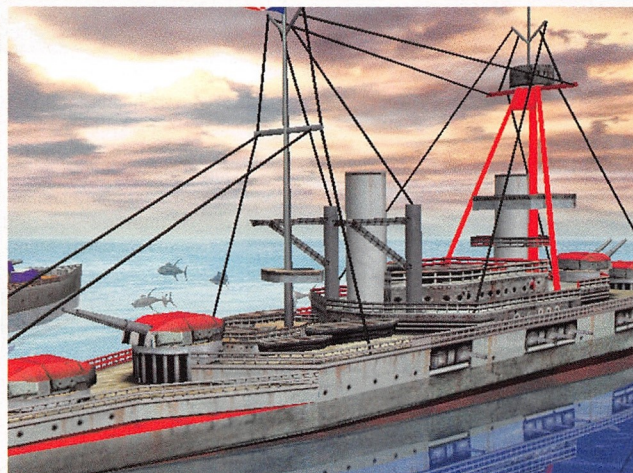


## ONLINE OPTIONS

Empires comes GameSpy-ready for up to seven players, offering the usual mix of RTS online options. Importantly though, it includes an Action mode structured around short games, as well as the opportunity to fight things out on a grand scale by upping the population limits. The online interface is straightforward, despite the expected early blips with GameSpy, and anyone familiar with Age of Empires style games will jump straight in. The online experience is often the decider with RTS games, and Stainless Steel seems committed to make this aspect of the game work well.



A ship at war. Yesterday.



"Where can a man get a drink in this town?"

## IT'S ALL IN THE DETAIL

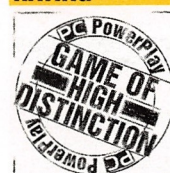
Empires has already drawn some well deserved praise for its attention to historical detail and the chance it offers to get right into the action. At high zoom levels things look more like an FPS than an RTS title, and the ability to jump into the middle of a cavalry charge or close-quarter battle is enough to keep you entertained for an afternoon in itself. It's not too practical from a command perspective - and you can't actually control a character - but it's a big improvement on the pixelated zooms we've grown used to over the years.

tendency for accents to change midway through conversations. Similarly, the long-range views look a little sparse compared to the close-ups, and finding or identifying individual units is often tricky.

Empires is a strong title that builds on the original and adds a few new twists. Stainless Steel has done a magnificent job of balancing gameplay across the civilisations, and the chance to jump from bows and arrows to fighter aircraft in a single game adds a lot of interest. The RTS world has moved on a little over the last couple of years and Empires: Dawn of the Modern World reflects most of those advances. It hasn't made the splash that Empire Earth did for a short time, but it's well worth the investment.

Des McNicholas

## RATING



### FOR

Great mix of civilisations & units  
Terrific attention to detail  
Outstanding close-ups

### AGAINST

A bit slow at times  
The visuals are a mixed bag  
The camera can be awkward

### OVERALL

A solid RTS that does just about everything very well indeed

# 86

three campaigns (a bit too slowly), as the broader picture is painted via longish cut-scenes and in-mission updates. The objectives aren't always as clear as they could be, and the large size of the maps means that a lot of wandering about occurs up front. Initial force numbers tend to be small, but starting from scratch isn't as common as it is in most similar titles and the lead characters in each campaign are remarkably powerful.

Empires has a nice assortment of land, sea and air units that get more interesting as things progress through the medieval, gunpowder, imperial, WWI and WWII epochs. They shape up very smartly in the 3D environment, and the remarkable attention to detail is evident at the higher zoom levels. Historical accuracy plays a role once again, with the Russians fielding Commissars, snipers and Cossacks against the elephants, Ming cavalry and war junks of China; alongside England's dreadnaughts, Sopwith Camels and Crusader tanks. The unit mix is a major strength of the title, and the decision to limit the role of research and upgrades ensures that exciting variants are available

pretty much from the start.

Veterans of the original game will be comfortable with Empires' interface, thanks to Stainless Steel's decision to refine a proven formula instead of launching a complete overhaul. Unit selection and control is pretty much standard RTS fare, supported by very effective on-screen icons and a good set of information choices. The screen can be a little cluttered at times, but situational awareness certainly isn't a problem and most actions are only a single click away. The camera system is outstanding after some practice, although players will need some patience during the first few major actions, and it takes a while to settle on the best overall management view.

Empires is a mixed bag visually. The ability to zoom right into the action is fantastic (although not particularly practical during combat) and the level of detail on individual units is first-rate. Surprisingly, the staged cut scenes aren't handled that well, coming across as a bit stilted and lacking any real sense of atmosphere. The voice acting doesn't really help there, thanks to poor scripting at times and a





Spot the ball, anyone?

# Pro Evolution Soccer 3

There's only one Trevor Brooking!



Developer: Konami ■ Publisher: Konami ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

P3-800  
128MB RAM  
32MB Videocard  
1Gig HDD

### WANT

P4-1.5Gig  
256MB RAM  
Gamepad

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

[www.pierluigirollins.it](http://www.pierluigirollins.it)

The bald guy on the box. The world's most famous referee. Worship him!

**D**on't even think about using the keyboard. PES3 is the football connoisseur's game of choice. You need fingers poised above shoulder buttons. You need thumbs glued to dual analogue sticks. You need quick and easy access to fully exploit every nuance of its subtle shoulder and face button combinations. You can't play this on the keyboard. If you do, I'll kick your ass.

And I'll kick more than your ass if you choose FIFA over this. The difference between EA's vacuous, casual gamer pleasing franchise and Konami's multi-layered, diamond in the rough cannot be over-stated. The former is a football game; the latter a game of football. Sure, EA Sports has forked out the cash to license all the real player names and likenesses, the real club names, stadia and kits. And, sure, Konami hasn't, so you're left with Trad Bricks instead of Manchester United, Museumplein instead of Ajax Amsterdam,



or simply hoofing it up the pitch. Your team-mates will track back and press in defence while also making intelligent runs forward into space to receive that crucial pass. They're fallible, too, losing the man they're marking, underhitting passes, crossing into touch, failing to trap the ball

## GET YOUR FIX HERE

Instead of the usual manual player switching, you can opt to "fix" yourself to just one player for the entire match. By placing the emphasis more on positional play - you have to mark your man - it puts a new spin on the experience, offering up something even closer to real football than we've seen before. Better yet, fix yourself to a "promising young player" and train him up. It's hugely rewarding when you've forged such a close bond with just one player.



properly or stumbling under a heavy challenge. It's not yet an accurate simulation of the sport, but it's a darn sight closer than any FIFA pretender to date.

And I haven't even mentioned the superb Master League mode, the new PES shop or the ultra-demanding training challenges... PES3 is not just a game, it's the beautiful game.

David Wildgoose

**you've got a game where you'll still be experiencing new things months from now**

and dozens of Farzels filling the Dutch player roster. Yet to cite this as a reason to get FIFA is to miss the point completely. It'd be like forgoing Call of Duty because Private Martin didn't actually take part in the D-Day landings. (And I'm sure there's already a mod that provides all the correct data.)

Where the PES3 - and the Pro Evo series as a whole - excels is in the depth of its controls. Anyone can hit pass and get some faltering attacks together, maybe even fluking a half-chance via a basic through-ball. But it takes genuine skill (and lots of practice) to switch the play to the opposite wing, jink past your

man and pick out the centre forward with a perfectly weighted cross. The intricacies of the button combos and the deft flicks and tricks afforded by the right analogue stick will take many weeks to master, but the expanded repertoire of actions brings success that much closer. Coupled with the extraordinary range of player animations and you've got a game where you'll still be experiencing new things months from now.

The other area where PES3 curls a free kick around the hapless FIFA is the player AI. Computer teams will play a patient game, passing it around the back, probing for an opening rather than running one out

## RATING



### OVERALL

The best football sim ever. The evolution starts here.

94



# Silent Hill 3

Waterproof your chair before playing this game

Developer: Konami ■ Publisher: Konami ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: Now

**T**ake one cute 17-year-old girl, a creepy detective and some of the most terrifying situations ever to grace the PC and you have yourself a rather accurate impression of what Silent Hill 3 has to offer. Although the game is the third in the series, it is actually more of a direct sequel to the first game, in plot, though not necessarily character.

Heather is just your average teen girl, she like hanging out with her friends, shopping, has a close but slightly uncomfortable relationship with her father and gets unnerved when strange men start to follow her. The strange man in this case is dishevelled detective Douglas, an initially mysterious figure with a desire to find out about Heather, as well as tell her about her life. You see, Heather isn't quite as normal as she appears, unless every 17-year old girl frequently finds herself transported to a nightmare land of grotesque bloody animal dolls, split headed dogs and unnervingly jointed and disturbingly

fleshy stick figures, amongst other, even more visceral horrors. As she slowly uncovers the secret of the terrifying reality, Heather also becomes aware that she may be the key to the whole ordeal and that she may not be who she thinks she is. Don't worry, this isn't a spoiler. This is just the beginning.

## Disorientation

Heather progresses through her harrowing story in a mixture of puzzle solving, combat and running the hell away from the latest thing to make you scream like a little bitch and soil your pants in fear. Although combat is part of the game, aside from the boss battles, most fights can be avoided, allowing the player to concentrate more on

the puzzle solving and having the shit scared out of you elements of the game. To that end, Konami has added two difficulty meters - one for puzzles and the other for combat, allowing the player to set their own levels for both to tailor the game to their specific needs. One criticism often levelled at survival horror games is the counter-intuitive control systems that most of them use. Silent Hill 3 is no exception, but it's still a lot more user-friendly than the Resident Evil series. Many people will also find fault with the camera angles that show very little of the surrounding area - this is a very deliberate tactic by the developer as there's nothing quite so white knuckle tense as knowing that there's something that doesn't have your best interests at heart lurking just out of sight. The level design is excellent with the carnival and underground station being truly outstanding.

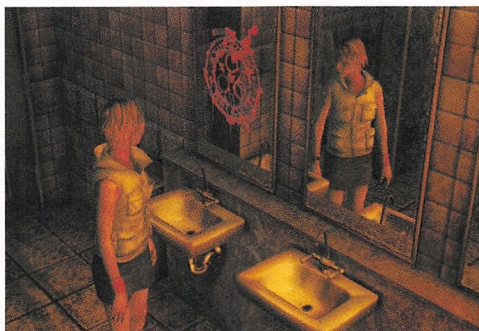
Silent Hill 3 looks absolutely amazing and can really push your machine, no matter how beefy, to the limits. At any texture resolution over 1024x1024, any machine will chug. Don't worry though, you don't need an absolute beast to run the game and have it look good.

Animations and cut-scenes are absolutely stunning, but the real star of the show is a filter used in most of the nightmare areas that renders them slightly grainy and with a frigid sepia tinge. The effect is simply brilliant. If you like being scared, you need Silent Hill 3, even if you've never played any other games in the series. Just don't expect the game to last much longer than about ten hours. The terror will last much longer.

Daniel Wilks

## SPOOK-TASTIC!

As with any horror game, sound plays a major role in Silent Hill 3. The soundtrack, effects and voice acting are absolutely perfect - just the thing for a 5.1 setup. Turn off the lights and crank up the sound and you'll be peeking over your shoulder to see if something is coming for you every 30 seconds. Don't worry if you don't have a great speaker setup though - simply plug in your headphones for a more claustrophobic experience. Either way, if you're not scared by the end of a session, you're either cast from stronger stuff than PCPP or are already dead.



## SYSTEM

### NEED

PIII 800MHz CPU or equivalent  
128Mb Ram  
32Mb 3D Video Card  
4Gb HDD

### WANT

P4 2.0GHz CPU or equivalent  
512Mb RAM  
128Mb 3D Video Card  
4Gb HDD

### MULTIPLAYER

No

### ONLINE

[www.reallyscary.com](http://www.reallyscary.com)

You want to see something really scary? OK, well it's not actually that scary at all but it's your best source for horror movie, book and game news.

## RATING

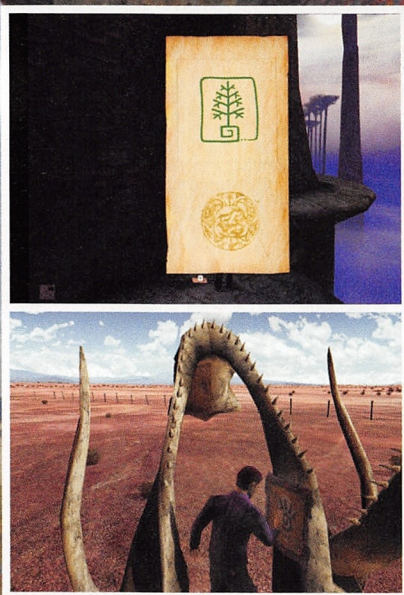


### OVERALL

Don't be surprised if you don't sleep well after playing this.

# 90





# Uru: Ages Beyond Myst

Interactive storybook or cure for insomnia?

Developer: Cyan Studios ■ Publisher: Ubi Soft ■ Distributor: Ubi Soft ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

800Mhz CPU  
256Mb RAM  
32Mb Videocard  
2Gb HDD space

### WANT

2.0 Ghz+  
512Mb RAM  
128Mb Videocard  
Broadband and I.E.  
6 for Uru Live

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

<http://urulive.ubi.com/US/>  
Just in case you wanted to get Mysty-eyed

**A**s far from the madding crowd as you can picture, there sits Uru: Ages Beyond Myst. The game even starts in the openness of desert, your only company being a large mesa lurking off to the side. I'd be disappointed if the back story doesn't involve mashed potato sculptures of the thing.

In the distance there is one lonely caravan with a slobby guy waiting to tell you that he doesn't know much, but he knows more than you. He knows that you've been drawn to this place. As he talks, an echoic and surreal, Peter Gabriel song seeps out of his trailer. He's the last living guy you see for an awfully long time.

## Gamers in the Myst

Like the previous Myst titles, Uru is a game of exploration and puzzle solving. Players wander from world to world, using link books, to solve the puzzles of an ancient civilisation.

Unlike the previous games, Uru has moved from painted backgrounds to a true 3D landscape. This is a mixed blessing. In one sense you feel like you are more of a part of the world, but it also means that the screens are generally less detailed than before, moving the experience from wandering through a lavishly illustrated picture book to

something more common.

The move also has a slightly baffling affect on the puzzles. For most of the game you wander through the landscape like a ghost, only really interacting with the world by pressing switches, stepping on pedals, pulling levers or entering mini-games.

Then you find a puzzle that requires

**you really need to stop and smell whatever passes for roses in the world you're exploring**

you not only have the switches in the right place but to have you walk a certain path you unlock the door. Now every simple puzzle becomes harder by a factor of ten. Instead of just trying to find the switch you missed, and fiddling with the order you flip them, now you start trying to walk backwards through doorways, push rocks with you or jump onto a painting on the floor in desperate attempt to crack the mystery. There are clues scattered throughout the levels – some in the form of diagrams that require a notepad and decent copying skills to take down – but they don't help as much as they should when you don't understand the parameters of the puzzles. Luckily, there always several

worlds on offer so if you get stuck you can always try digging deeper into one of the other strange lands.

## Ambiance

The feel of the single player game is defined by alien landscapes that look like they might have evolved on the cover of a groovy 70s record, the great lilting music

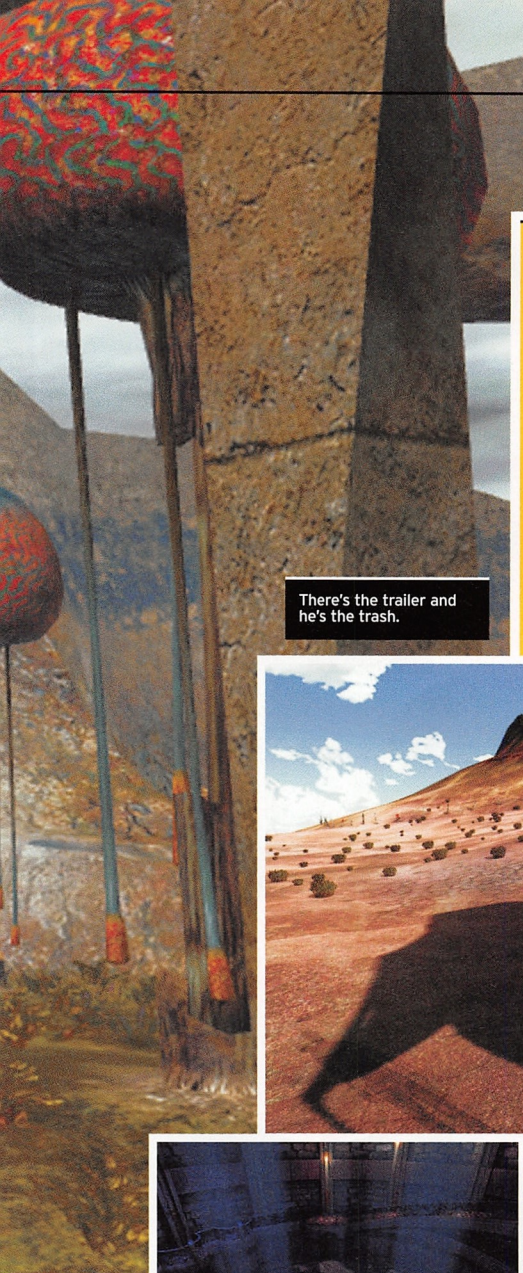
and the sense of solitude. It all works well with the puzzle-based nature of the world as you'll never find yourself chased by angry beasts or having to dive for cover. This is a dreamy and thoughtful place.

Something that adds to the tone but isn't totally helpful is the complete lack of in-game instruction. If you find a glowing sigil on one level and it appears in your world book, then you have to figure out what it does. If you activate that telescope you have to guess whether it's eye-candy or a puzzle. Only time, and poking around, will tell.

## No Stone Unturned

To enjoy this game you really have to want to poke under every rock. You have

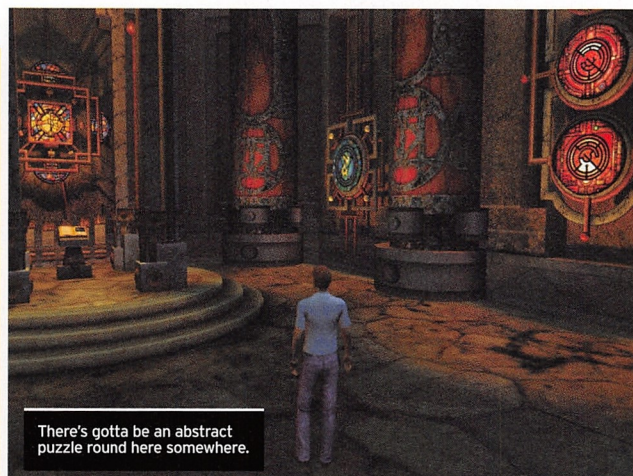
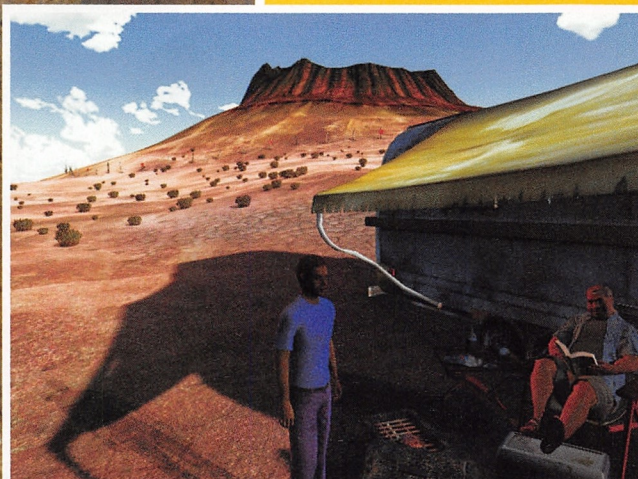




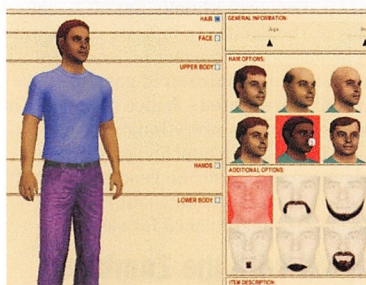
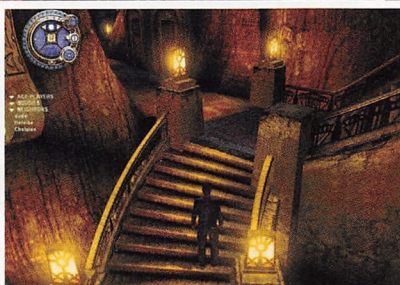
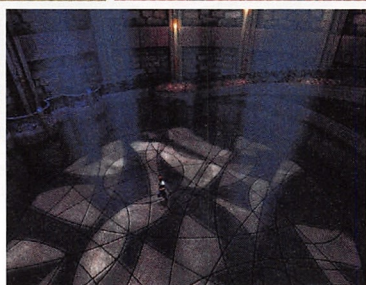
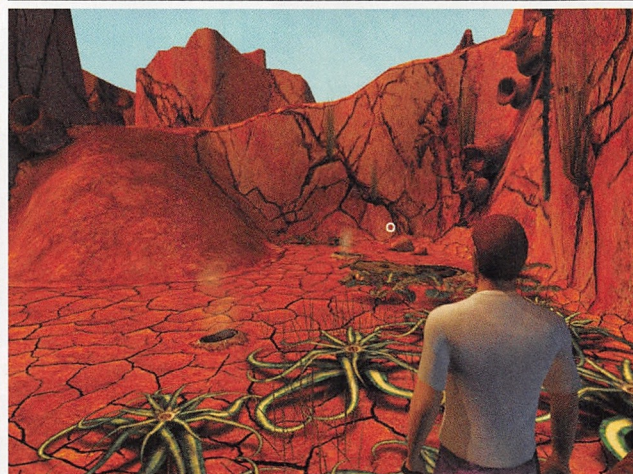
There's the trailer and he's the trash.

## TOILET HUMOUR

When your character appears in the red desert at the beginning of the game, you think for a moment that it could be the outback. You wonder if this game might have been made by Australians. You soon realise that there's no chance. There is a simple give-away. It's the name of the lost civilisations: the D'ni. It's not that much to look at, but it's pronounced Dun-ee or dunny. I guess that means that I'm solving all of these puzzles and traipsing across vast worlds all in search of a loo. I've heard less convincing motivations.



There's gotta be an abstract puzzle round here somewhere.



to flip every switch, press every puzzle button, pull every lever, study every painting that even looks like a clue and look around every corner for something to press. This is not a game for people who like to zip through levels. You really need to stop and smell whatever passes for roses in the world you're exploring.

Besides a "request" to find seven handprints in every world, there is no directing force for your adventures. You're only motivation is to unlock new worlds and find new passages of writing. This has the strength that you can truly explore the worlds at hand in any order but doesn't encourage any tension, suspense or sense of urgency. While the story is layered and interesting, the

individual entries from the people you're following falls a little short of being poetic enough to match the visuals of the world, which is a bit of a pity.

Another area that's just off the pace is the game control. Generally you move by clicking and holding the spot on screen where you want to go. This is fine except that the camera likes to move around as you go, making it hard to track where you're headed. If you fix the camera in one spot you can't always see what's happening. Luckily, there's also a first-person mode and between it, the arrow keys and the other control options you can handle most anything the game throws at you.

## Going Live

Sometimes the thing you most wish the game would throw at you is other characters. That's where Uru Live comes in. It is the fascinating blending of the single-player game and a persistent online world. You can even import your single-player process when you create an account.

Once in Live you gain access to an ancient D'ni city which becomes the hub for meeting other explorers. Since the whole thing is online there can always be

new things to see and new puzzles to tackle (some of which require co-operation) as the developers continually update.

In effect, it extends the scope of the single player game to be boundless, and replaces the solitude with an invitation-only social event. The addition of Live is a major new draw for Myst fans as it's a place to chill out, get some help for the tougher puzzles and try new things. It's also a safe place where people can only wreck your game by words, since there's no conflict or items to steal.

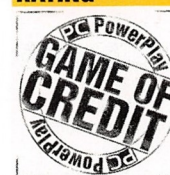
## Uru for You?

Like the other Myst games, this is a very specific experience. If you love slow and gentle exploration and have a head for puzzles, then this game is perfect for you. Likewise, if you're a PC user who has never had time for games (or you are trying to get your folks hooked), this might be just the thing. You can't die, so there is a dreamy-safe feel to it and you don't have to have Quake-honed reflexes or game understanding to get in the door.

If you think of most games being designed with TV-like action in mind, think of Uru as starting with something more like an art gallery. Each world is a self-contained painting to be explored and unlocked, with the promise of more paintings to view if you do well. When you get tired of one, you just side-step to another. Uru Live makes it an endless gallery and let's you bring your friends along. When all is said and done, this isn't a game for everyone; if you hate switch-puzzles forget it, and people looking for pacing, tension and danger need not apply.

Timothy C. Best

## RATING



### FOR

Dreamy-safe  
Plenty to see  
Puzzling

### AGAINST

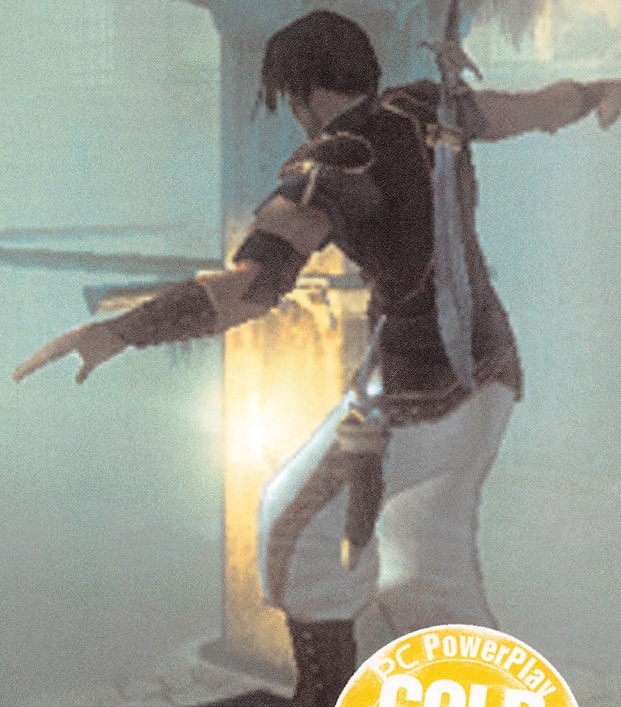
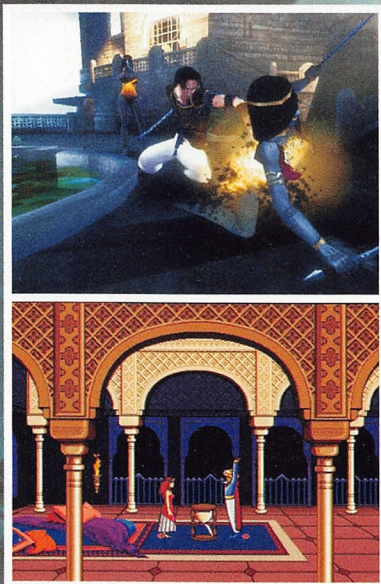
Limited interactivity  
No Pacing  
Puzzling

### OVERALL

A painterly game  
for gentle explorers  
who don't mind a  
puzzle.

71





# Prince of Persia

## The Sands of Time

Who needs the Matrix when you've got Persia?

Developer: Ubi Soft Montreal ■ Publisher: Ubi Soft ■ Distributor: Ubi Soft ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M 15+ ■ Available: Now

### SYSTEM

#### NEED

P3-733  
128MB RAM  
32MB videocard  
1.5gig HDD

#### WANT

P4 2gig  
512MB RAM  
64MB videocard  
Gamepad

#### MULTIPLAYER

No

#### ONLINE

[www.raidersnewsupdate.com/saddamnew.htm](http://www.raidersnewsupdate.com/saddamnew.htm)

I typed Prince of Persia into Google and wound up finding this - a page dedicated to bringing you all the Saddam Hussein news you could want. Strange world huh?

**W**ithout a doubt the Prince of Persia franchise is one of the most well-known and beloved of "old school" PC gaming and for good reason. When the game was first released back in 1989 we had never seen anything like it before, not necessarily in terms of gameplay (anyone remember Impossible Mission?) but more in terms of style. We'd never seen animations of the quality presented to us by Jordan Mechner's baby. Much hubbub was made at the time about how the then 25 year old Mechner filmed his

brother performing the actions of the young Prince and the meticulously rotoscoping the footage so it could be turned into a computer animation. The result, as we all know by now was spectacular. Seeing the Prince waver at the end of a platform, desperately shifting his body to try to remain balanced causes a number of hearts to beat a little faster and watching him throw himself over a vast gap only to find partial purchase on the other side was as thrilling as any movie released at the time. Then came Prince of Persia 2 four years later in 1993, a near perfect sequel to the original game marred only by it's extreme level of difficulty. Then six year after that came what looked to be the death knell of the series, the lamentable Prince of Persia 3D. Bringing the Prince into the third dimension sounded like a good idea on

paper but the final result was so disappointing for myriad reasons that many of us were initially put off by the idea of The Sands of Time. We didn't want to be disappointed again by lacklustre level design or uninspired gameplay. We needn't have feared - Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time is everything we could have hoped for in a technologically advanced PoP game. So good in fact that it makes you forget all about Prince of Persia 3D, and the need for sleep.

### Again with the Zombies

Why is it so good? A combination of brilliant animation, excellent level design, tight and thrilling combat and some truly inspired scripting is why. This time around the Prince isn't such a good guy - he's responsible for releasing the evil of the titular Sands of Time upon the poor unsuspecting people of the kingdom. After being conned into attacking a nearby kingdom by his evil Vizier (is there any other kind?), the Sultan (the Prince's dad) gives a gift of a huge magical hourglass to one of his friends, a timepiece broken by the power of the Dagger of Time, a trinket taken from the ransacked kingdom by the Prince. Infected by the sands, everyone bar the Prince and a mysterious woman are turned into zombie-like creatures by

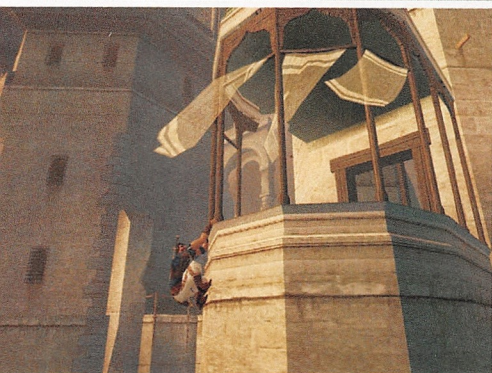
### MOUSE?

Although The Sands of Time is perfectly playable using a keyboard/mouse, it's a far more enjoyable experience playing with a good gamepad. Before anyone gets up in arms about keyboard and mouse being a far better and more precise method of control than a gamepad, you've got to take into account that this is a console game a heart and therefore created with a gamepad in mind. The precision of the mouse is ultimately the problem with the control, as the cinematic camera angles used in many of the areas make using the mouse counter-intuitive.





He's an agile little fella.



## WHO DOES SHE THINK SHE IS?

As with the quality of the rest of the game, the sound is absolutely excellent, with special mention going to the voice acting for both the Prince and his female companion. The two bicker like an old married couple and the Prince often makes snide remarks when her shapely backside is out of the room. Unfortunately, on occasion the music swells too loud to hear all of the conversations. Luckily the quasi-Middle Eastern soundtrack is good enough that you won't really care overly much.



Combat effortlessly makes you feel cool.



entire thing was animated by hand, allowing the Prince to perform his gravity defying feats without ever looking anything less than entirely believable.

## Prince Payne?

Aside from the physical obstacles, most areas also feature a number of the time zombies created by the sand. Gone are the days of stepping forward and back whilst making the occasional thrust as in the original game - combat is now a beautiful flowing beast that manages to out-Matrix Enter the Matrix for sheer spectacular coolness. Armed with a sword and the Dagger of Time, the Prince can leap around avoiding blows, strike in combos and with the use of a dodge button perform special moves such as rolling under a sword blow and using the momentum to stab, leaping off walls to make stronger attacks or a personal favourite, running up an enemy's chest to flip behind them and deliver a powerful blow. Once the player has found the Dagger of Time they gain access to the game's most impressive feature, the ability to manipulate time. In combat, the dagger is used something like a wooden stake, delivering deathblows to incapacitated time zombies. As the dagger claims more lives, it stores up charges of sand that can be used to slow time (a-la Bullet Time), freeze enemies or reverse time. The last effect is by far the most useful and impressive, allowing players to literally reverse the flow of time for about ten seconds, allowing them to cheat death by avoiding deathblows or fatal falls.

In a genre dominated by Tomb Raider it's wonderful to see a familiar face appear on the CRT again with a game so polished and professional that it makes all its competitors look dated by comparison. Do yourself a favour and get a copy of Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time - this is the way third-person action adventure should be done.

Daniel Wilks



the power of the sands. It's up to the Prince to destroy the army of time-dilated undead, collect the sands and return the world to normal. Whilst it sounds all rather easy on paper it's a little harder to pull off in real (virtual) life. Rather than present the player with a number of seemingly unrelated dungeons like in the original game, The Sands of Time presents players with one huge castle to explore, broken up in to a huge number of areas, each of which must be conquered in turn to unlock the

like in the first game, the Prince can now run a few steps up or a fair distance across a wall, jump from wall runs, wall jump, roll, back-flip, climb columns and swing off branches or flagpoles. Each area is filled with obstacles and traps that must be negotiated using a combination of the Prince's skills. Unfortunately the level design dictates that there is only one set way through each area, a route that is not always that obvious. To get around this initial difficulty, Ubi Soft Montreal has come up with an ingenious little hint

## everything we could have hoped for in a technologically advanced Prince of Persia

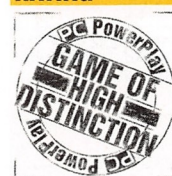
next area. Whilst this may not sound too different from most games, it gives a kind of cohesiveness and feeling of narrative momentum that is quite rare.

### 3D adds a little depth

The Prince's move to proper 3D isn't simply a matter of aesthetics - the fact that he can move in all three dimensions has given the resourceful young Persian a number of new moves, all of which must be mastered if you want to finish the game. Aside from running and jumping

system. Each level contains a save point (a beam of time dilating light) that, when used will give the player a brief fast motion FMV of some of the things they will need to do to complete the next level. The FMV works brilliantly, letting the player in on just enough to compel them to play the next area whilst not spoiling the experience in the slightest. Little needs to be said about the amazing graphics and animation aside from the fact that this time around there were no video cameras or brothers involved - the

## RATING



### FOR

Incredible animations  
Addictive  
Brilliant level design

### AGAINST

Linear  
Occasional camera problems

### OVERALL

The Prince is back in all his glory, further cementing the idea that Ubi Soft is becoming one of the great development houses.

91





# Hidden and Dangerous 2

Enjoy last issue's free game? Well, here's the sequel...

Developer: Illusion Softworks ■ Publisher: Gathering of Developers ■ Distributor: Take 2 Interactive ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M16+ ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

PIII 1Ghz  
128MB RAM  
32MB DirectX Video Card  
2.4GB HDD

### WANT

P4 2Ghz  
512MB RAM  
128MB DirectX Video Card

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

Des?  
Hello...?  
Dessssss!?!?

**H**idden and Dangerous made quite a name for itself four years ago, despite being released with a long list of bugs and a less than intuitive interface. Throwing players into the SAS, H&D combined tough combat missions with a strong RPG flavour, a few basic team elements and some fairly impressive environments. Despite establishing a strong following from this early foray into the now commonplace WWII genre, developer Illusion Softworks has taken its time with the sequel to address some of the nagging problems that beset the original. The result is a visually and tactically impressive game that still carries a surprising number of minor faults.

H&D2 is a large scale campaign based title that takes players around the world to tackle German, Italian and Japanese troops in Africa, Asia, the Arctic and Europe. Single player options include a squad based Campaign game, a Lone Wolf mode, a Carnage mode that requires the destruction of all opposing forces, Single Mission replays of successfully completed Campaign levels, and Single Mission Carnage. The Campaign includes some basic tutorial missions and multiplayer is supported (just) for up to 32 players via LAN and Internet. It's a good mix, and the long-term and challenging nature of most missions means that it brings a decent level of replay value.

## ONLINE SHENANIGANS

H&D2 multiplayer supports up to 32 players via LAN or Internet. Game modes include Objectives, in which each side must complete set missions or kill their opponents; Deathmatch and Occupation (capture the flag). We had significant problems getting things to run properly in GameSpy over the Internet, due to a combination of bugs and a less than intuitive interface. Things should be patched by now, but don't expect anything too special. The player and inventory selection process is essentially the same as in single-player, and players have the choice of speeding things up through a number of equipment pre-sets. The online environments are very impressive and support seems to be growing slowly.

H&D2 provides a remarkable range of options for team and inventory selection. Four squad members can be chosen from forty candidates, each with a different mix of attributes and skills. Attributes include health, which determines how much damage they can take; strength, which is handy for carting around heavy weapons; and endurance, which indicates how fast and far a soldier can travel on the mark-1

boot. Skills cover shooting accuracy, stealth capability, first-aid and lock picking. Fortunately, an auto-select option is available for those that are just keen to get into the action, and the AI can be relied upon to come up with a reasonable solution for newer players.

Illusion has stuck with the excellent mission briefing formats that were so popular in the original, supported by solid voice-overs and some nice animations. Aside from developing the plot, the briefings actually bring useful information and suggestions, some of which become very important when choosing inventory items and progressing through the campaign. The missions themselves are generally well designed (despite a few long and tedious levels), with a good set of objectives and some tough challenges. Routes in and tactics are pretty much up to the player and the enemy AI is usually smart enough to throw up some unexpected surprises.

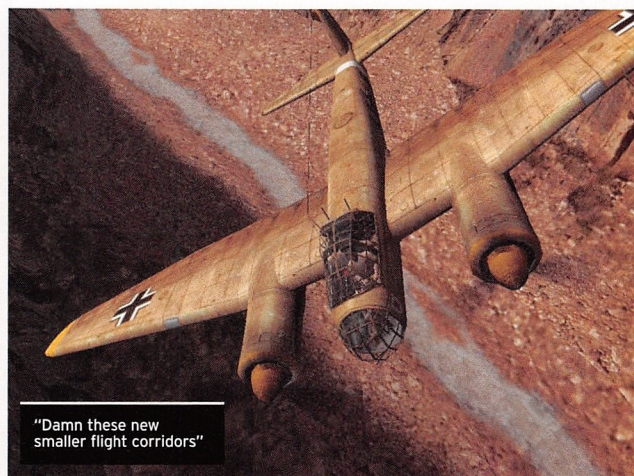
The on-screen interface is well presented with enough information to get the job done. A compass (an optional item for some reason) provides direction and highlights the location of friendly and known enemy troops; a simple weapon box outlines ammunition stocks and weapon types; and speed and stance indicators allow quick checks of status on the run.



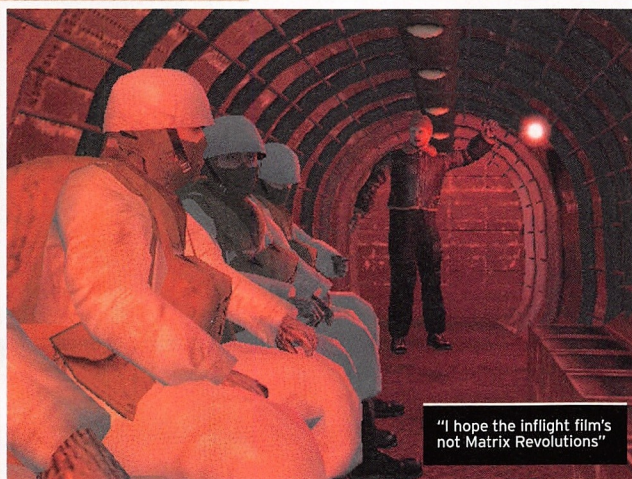
## WHAT TO WEAR..?

Choosing the right inventory is important in H&D2 because you don't get many chances to change your mind as the campaign progresses. Nothing worse than meeting a Tiger tank without your bazooka! As with everything else in the game, the number of choices is daunting. Equipment includes a backpack (for carrying extra gear), binoculars, cameras, compasses, first aid kits, diving gear, keys and wire cutters; and weapons are divided into light, medium and heavy varieties. Pistols, knives, rifles, machine guns and anti-tank weapons are available, rounded out by mines, bombs and grenades. If it all gets too hard, players can choose the auto select option and run with the AI's preferences.

Planning a great escape, perhaps?



"Damn these new smaller flight corridors"



"I hope the inflight film's not Matrix Revolutions"



Status boxes are also provided for all squad members, showing weapon type, hearing range and skills; while endurance and health details are provided via simple bars. The interface works very well, leaving the bulk of the screen for a largely uninterrupted view of the game's first-rate environments.

Character control is achieved through a combination of keystrokes and mouse, and players will find that things are a little cumbersome at times. This is partly because Illusion has provided a lot of interaction options, but also because it hasn't quite managed to match the free flowing interfaces we've grown used to from FPS titles over the last few years. Speed is controlled by mouse wheel, which is quite effective after a while, and context sensitive menus are used to interact with the environment. It all works well enough, but things can occasionally become frustrating as the flow of the game is interrupted by the process.

Squad control is well implemented, although players will again find that some aspects have been over-engineered. Soldiers can be controlled directly (one at a time) by cycling using the TAB key, or

remotely through the use of the Command Menu. The Command Menu is a layered series of orders that covers every aspect of squad control, from attacks through to silent movement and formations. An optional Tactical Mode is available in some missions, allowing players to assign waypoints and issue orders from a higher level 3D perspective. In an unbelievably dumb decision for a title with so many

## the enemy AI is usually smart enough to throw up some surprises

keystrokes, no master list is provided in the manual - an omission that may turn hosts of potential players away.

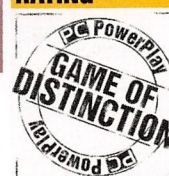
As with the original title, the AI can be very poor at times, a problem made all the more frustrating by the fact that some elements of it are very well done. Squad members still tend to get in each other's way, particularly in doorways and narrow corridors, and the enemy seems deaf and

blind at critical moments. That said, most squad members work well and seem to conform to the lead character's actions (so well at times that the complex squad control system seems unnecessary) and the enemy is more than capable of reacting well to sudden strikes. In a nice touch that should be standard in all games like this, squad members will automatically copy the stance (standing, crouching or lying) assumed by the leader.

H&D2 is a solid title that improves significantly on its predecessor, but players will be disappointed with the number of minor bugs and the seeming failure to correct some obvious faults. The command system is comprehensive but cumbersome, and the AI lets things down every now and then. On the upside, things look outstanding, the missions are very tough, the campaign hangs together very well and the music is terrific. The RPG flavour will attract players tired of the straight shooters that have recently dominated the WWII market, and the attention to historical detail will please veteran gamers. A worthwhile experience if you have the patience needed to work through some flaws.

Des McNicholas

## RATING



## FOR

Excellent environments  
Tough missions  
Terrific attention to detail

## AGAINST

Cumbersome interface  
A few disappointing bugs  
No keystroke list!

## OVERALL

A decent shooter with an RPG flavour that doesn't quite reflect the amount of time and effort spent on it.

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# Wallace & Gromit Project Zoo

Play-doh's finest gaming moment



Developer: Frontier ■ Publisher: Bam! ■ Distributor: Acclaim ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

P3-667  
128MB RAM  
32MB Video card  
500MB HDD

### WANT

P4-2GHz+  
256MB RAM  
64MB Video card  
500MB HDD

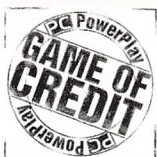
### MULTIPLAYER

No

### ONLINE

[www.aardman.com](http://www.aardman.com)  
The Aardman Animation homepage. Check out their non W&G ventures.

## RATING



### OVERALL

Great Wallace & Gromit, so-so game

65

**P**roject Zoo proves that a decent license, properly executed, can go a long way toward making up for a lack-lustre game. This Wallace & Gromit themed platformer brings absolutely nothing new to the genre, but dresses it up in an excellent, and very authentic, package.

First up, if you have no idea who Wallace and Gromit are, do yourself a favour and go and hire them on video, or even better, buy yourself a copy from your friendly local ABC shop. We're talking prize-winning claymation whimsical comedy following the misadventures of inventor extraordinaire, Wallace, and his long-suffering dog Gromit. There's always been something about W&G that no one else has ever seemed able to capture, and that certain something has made it in to Project Zoo.

## Tastes like clay

And thank god for that - because without the W&G magic this would be one ordinary game. The premise is neat - Wallace and Gromit are due to visit their adopted polar bear cub Archie at the local zoo, for the little tyke's birthday. Unfortunately, when they turn up the zoo is padlocked. A quick call to directory assistance, and Wallace is shocked to learn the Zoo is now "ex directory". Seconds later, who should happen upon the scene but that evil penguin from The Wrong Trousers - Feathers McGraw! He's up to something new and nefarious, and what's worse, he's taken Archie prisoner. Quickly fashioning a Trojan-horse style giant penguin, Wallace and Gromit smuggle themselves into the zoo and the adventure begins!

Or, to be precise, the frustrating mostly-broken 3D platforming begins. Like 3D platformers on PC since time immemorial (okay, since Evil Twin), Project Zoo has a fundamentally broken camera, dodgy collision detection and awkward controls.

## CUT SCENES

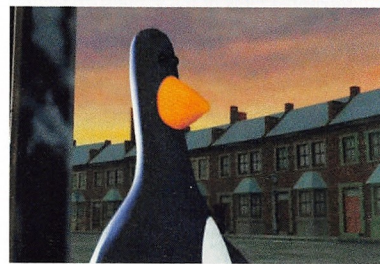
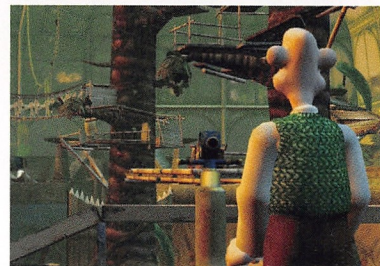
One thing about Project Zoo is its unquestionable Aardman authenticity. The cut-scenes in the game are exactly what you'd expect from the next Wallace & Gromit adventure, and fans will not be disappointed. In fact, the visuals are so authentic that it will take you a few moments to realise they're pre-rendered 3D, not claymation. However, while each scene is great and impeccably directed, they are a little over-long for a game. You'll have to sit through five minutes' worth at the beginning, which is considerably longer than many of Aardman Animations' early films.

The designers have done their best to minimise the problems and likewise give the player plenty of things to do to take their minds off them, but alas they're fighting a losing battle. Each level is a self-contained arena that Gromit can move about freely, shooting things, jumping on things, and slowly unlocking more and more bits of the level until the game can progress.

## The Wrong Controller

As implied, the player controls the indefatigable Gromit, but Wallace also trundles about the level and can be summoned to repair various devices and create new weapons for his faithful mutt. Gromit bounces around collecting nuts and bolts to power Wallace's fixin' and bananas to power his banana gun. And so it goes.

Because of the excellent W&G flavour, this would be a great game despite the hardly revolutionary gameplay. But the traditional problems of 3D platforming on PC are more than usually apparent here - the game has been ported across from console where the double analogue sticks



allow one stick for movement and the other for camera control. Played with a gamepad, Project Zoo does get a little better, but on keyboard it's a nightmare.

It's a shame really. A bit of smarter programming, taking design cues from 3D greats such as Mario 64, any recent Zelda game, even American McGee's Alice would have made Project Zoo much easier to recommend.

Anthony Fordham

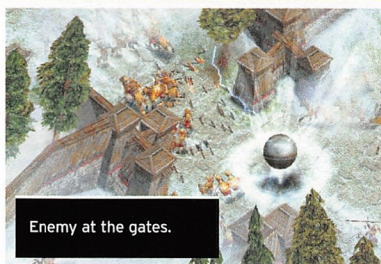


# Age of Mythology: The Titans

Unlike Atlantis, The Titans won't sink out of sight

Developer: Ensemble Studios ■ Publisher: Microsoft ■ Distributor: Microsoft ■ Price: \$??? ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

**T**he question that has to be answered first when reviewing an expansion pack is, "what's the point?" Is the point of the expansion simply to squeeze out the last little bit of money from the franchise or does the expansion actually add something substantial to the original game. Far too often we see expansion packs that do nothing other than drain your wallet but thankfully Age of Mythology: The Titans is not one of



Enemy at the gates.

these, adding a very cleverly designed 12 mission single player campaign, a new race, new god powers and new units.

Although the title may lead the player to believe that the new race being introduced will be the Titans, this is not the case. Players are introduced to the Atlanteans, a proud race trying to take their rightful place along side the other dominant cultures - the Greeks, Egyptians and Vikings. Unfortunately in their rush to gain power and ascend to their desired position, the Atlanteans awake the titular Titans, a race of giants hell bent on destroying their enemies; the gods of the Greeks, Norse and Egyptians. Whilst the missions BT (Before Titans) are fairly similar to the missions seen in the original campaign, those AT (After Titans) are a whole new kettle of fish, as only a concerted all out attack or another Titan

## the Atlantean race is more accessible

### AI

One of the major complaints about Age of Mythology was that the unit AI wasn't really up to scratch. The Titans goes a long way to fixing this, improving unit pathfinding and difficulty balance to a huge degree. At the normal degree of difficulty players shouldn't have too hard a time finishing the campaign but turn up the difficulty a notch to hard and you'll be in for a real challenge. Beat that and you're ready for Titan level difficulty - a serious challenge for even the most hardcore gamer.

even stands a chance of defeating one of these enormous creatures.

In a somewhat bold move, Ensemble Studios has made the Atlantean race more easily accessible than any of the original three races, cutting down on the need for detailed resource management and supplying some powerful new units. Although this approach may offend some purists it should serve well to attract new players to the franchise, especially if Microsoft decide to bundle the main game and expansion together at some stage. The new myth units for the Atlanteans are some of the best looking and most interesting of any race, including the Proteans - living lumps of clay that split into two smaller aggressive lumps when "killed" and the Automatons - self repairing suits of animate armour. Like the other three races, the Atlanteans can choose from three major gods to worship; Kronos, Oranos and Gaia, the father of Zeus, the father of Kronos and wife of Oranos respectively.

Whilst the single player campaign is very clever and forces players to think strategically to beat the large maps and multiple mission objectives, not all is good in the world of The Titans. A few new additions have been made to multiplayer that has the potential to really screw up unit balance. One of the new buildings available allows players to train any human unit into a hero, making them into a powerful opponent, equally good against basic and mythical units, basically relegating the myth units to being little more than expensive and flashy window dressing. How this change in unit balance will effect the online community is yet to be seen.

Daniel Wilks

## SYSTEM

### NEED

P11-300  
32MB RAM  
500MB HDD  
16Mb 3D  
accelerator

### WANT

P111-800  
256MB RAM  
1.5GB HDD  
32MB 3D  
accelerator

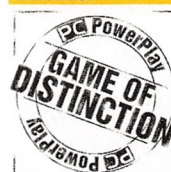
### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

[www.atlan.org](http://www.atlan.org)  
"We present a novel theory on Atlantis that will cause a revolution in the fields of archaeology and the human sciences". Yeah, right.

## RATING



### OVERALL

It's nice to see an expansion pack that really adds something to the original game.

83



# Patrician III

Don't judge a game by its cover

Developer: Ascaron ■ Publisher: Ascaron ■ Distributor: Red Ant ■ Price: \$49.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

PII 233MHz or equivalent CPU  
32Mb RAM  
8Mb Video Card  
560Mb HDD

### WANT

PII 450MHz or equivalent CPU  
64Mb HDD  
32Mb 3D Video Card  
660Mb HDD

### MULTIPLAYER

Yes

### ONLINE

[www.ucalgary.ca/app/led\\_history/tutor/end/middle/economy.html](http://www.ucalgary.ca/app/led_history/tutor/end/middle/economy.html)  
Just in case you're interested in learning something about trade in the Middle Ages.

## RATING



### OVERALL

Unlike the terrible box art, Patrician III is a very professional and polished product.

# 84

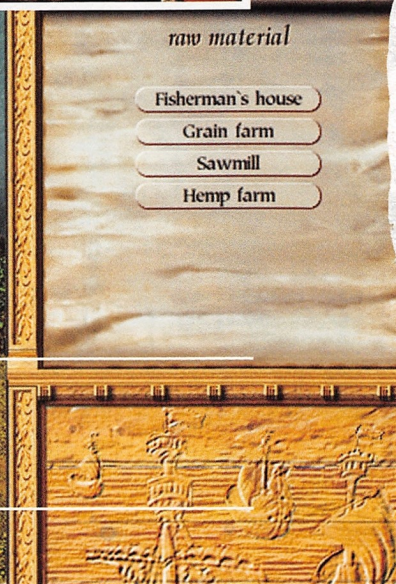
It's very disappointing to receive a game with such hideously amateur looking box art as Patrician III and begin to look forward to panning the hell out of the game only to load it up and discover that it's actually really good. The discovery that the game is actually good is not the disappointing part - it's the realisation that all of the bile you have stored up for the last couple of months must once again be packed back down into your subconscious to be released at a future, more inappropriate time, such as the next meeting with your boss. As the back of the box proudly exclaims (and you could probably figure out yourself unless you're some form of lover primate, Patrician III is "based on the award winning Patrician II", a well loved but relatively unknown city building/trade simulator. In this third iteration of the series, players take the role of a trader in the Hanse, a group of affiliated non-aligned cities ruled by Burghers or councils of rich citizens around the 13th century. Players must trade, build up the

city, fight off pirates and improve the infrastructure with the eventual hope that they will be promoted to Patrician.

Although Patrician III has a quick single game mode and can be played online, the real meat of the game lays in the impressive campaign that can be tackled in pretty much whatever order the player so desires. The wide variation of mission styles is what makes it so compelling. You may find yourself simply trying to make a bit of money to build up a town, captaining a trade route during the Black Plague or trying to recoup losses after the business has been horribly mismanaged. Although many of the missions have a set timeframe, how to approach the goals is up to the player. Instead of simply finding the best trade routes to exploit to make a name for themselves, you could spend the money on schooling and civil amenities thereby raising both the profile of the town as well as your own profile, build up a navy making the populace feel safe and yourself beloved of the people, or even turn pirate to gain your fortune by nefarious means.

## PIECES OF EIGHT

Although pirates are a threat to trading in Patrician III and the player has the option to hoist the skull and crossbones themselves, don't go in expecting grand naval battles or daring do at sea. When trading the player simply chooses one of their ships, clicks on the city they want to go to and the journey is represented as a coloured dot on a line between the two cities. Players can choose to sit back and wait for the journey to end or simply speed up time until the ship reaches its destination. Either way you're not going to be seeing cannons blazing and boarding manoeuvres if and when pirates attack.



## Cartography

A game manual isn't usually something that makes an appearance in a review but in this case it's more than worth a sentence or two. The control system is necessarily complex but thanks to the excellent documentation it's fairly easy to learn. Once you complete the lengthy campaign mode, players can create their own maps and set the conditions to further challenge their trading skills and extend the life of the title. Not bad for a budget game, huh?

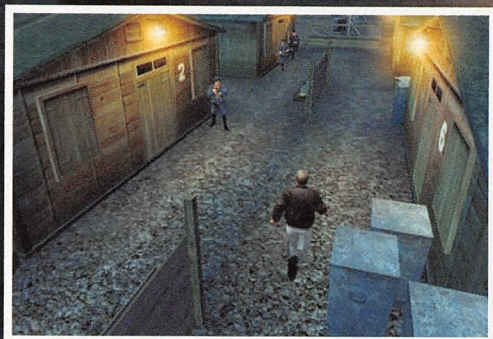
Although dated by today's standards, Patrician III still has a pleasing Middle Ages aesthetic that won't chug on any computer made in the last half decade. It's nothing spectacular but definitely gets the job done. Similarly the sound is decent but does nothing to make it stand out from myriad other city building games. Luckily the gameplay is solid and compelling, made even more so when the price is taken into consideration.

Daniel Wilks

## build up a navy making the populace feel safe or even turn pirate to make your fortune







# The Great Escape

Someone please... let me out!

Developer: Pivotal ■ Publisher: MGM Interactive ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

**T**he only really surprising thing about The Great Escape is that it's taken this long to make an appearance. This is one of the more obvious film/game tie-ins and it's good to see that developer Pivotal has resisted the urge to churn out a GBA platformer (Jurassic Park III: DNA Factor, anyone?) and instead made an attempt to produce a tight, tense sneak-em-up in best Thief tradition. An attempt that almost works.

TGE attempts to mix Thief with Medal of Honor. On the one hand you have the heavy reliance on stealth and shadows, and on the other hand you have the mix of activities and various mini-game style set-pieces.

## Hail to your McMajesty

The premise is simple - you are a number of different plucky Allied POWs vying to escape from a number of different Nazi POW camps. It's all stiff upper-lip, all-for-Blighty, where's-Chalky-Nobby-and-Ginge good sport, glossing over the less palatable aspects of POW life such as starvation, torture and ABC miniseries written by Roy Slaven.

Unlike the film, which takes place in a single camp, TGE spreads the action around and allows the player to take the part of different characters. While the

film deals with the big break from Stalag Luft III, the game gives you the backstory of each of the major characters, including how they were captured in the first place. And following the big break the game continues, following the brave band of Britishers as they flee across occupied Europe until the final, definitive scene with Steve McQueen on a motorbike.

The game opens in the middle of a bombing run behind enemy lines, with the player's bomber sustaining a direct hit. The player must put out some fires, man the tail gun for a while, destroy the code book and then bail out. The action is varied and paced well, but here, as throughout the game, everything feels like you're in a stage play.

This is because most of the scenery looks like it's made out of papier mache. Once again, TGE is a console port, so don't expect fabulous textures and high-res models. It also feels like a stage play because a lot of the acting is pretty wooden.

## Hogan!

What I mean of course is that the AI in the game is rather ordinary. In a stealth-em-up decent enemy AI is essential - the guards, for example, should not be able

to see you if you're hidden in shadows, and should be able to see you if you're standing right in front of them. TGE sometimes gets these two important elements mixed up.

Also, in an attempt to add some kind of challenge, the game limits how many in-mission saves you are permitted, and of course as always this equals frustration rather than challenge as your repeat the same chunks of level again and again.

Thief fans will find the stealth aspects of TGE pretty lack-lustre - the player has to run around collecting various objects but the stealthiness just doesn't seem important. If there are no guards about, you can just stroll around whistling.

If you want a WW2 stealth-em-up and you're not too demanding, TGE should keep you entertained for at least half a day. But as always, the movie is still much better.

Anthony Fordham

## SYSTEM

### NEED

P3-500  
64MB RAM  
32MB Video card  
500MB HDD

### WANT

P3-1GHz+  
128MB RAM  
GeForce3  
500MB HDD

### MULTIPLAYER

No

### ONLINE

[www.sixflags.com/parks/greatescape](http://www.sixflags.com/parks/greatescape)  
Yes! The ultimate theme park! Six thrilling roller-coasters including the Canyon Blaster! Death, mayhem and candy floss!

## RATING



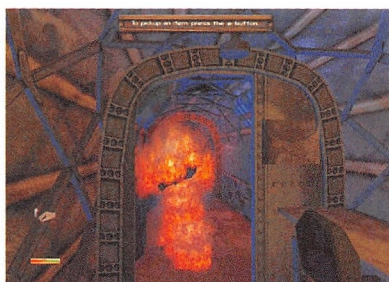
### OVERALL

Standard stealthy fare

59

## CAMP COMMANDANT

The Great Escape follows the tradition of mythologising and, dare we say it, romanticising the POW experience during WW2. The story goes like this - British captured behind enemy lines were put in basic but clean camps and left to their own devices. Nazi camp officers gave British officers jurisdiction over the inmates, on the understanding that it was every British officer's sworn duty to escape. There was certainly no torture, executions (apart from the good, clean honourable soldier's end of being shot) cruelty or name-calling. It was all good clean fun. Yeah right.







# The Hobbit

Who has a big head, big eyes and isn't an anime character?

Developer: Fizz Factor ■ Publisher: Sierra ■ Distributor: Vivendi Universal ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G 8+ ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

PIII-450 or equivalent CPU  
128MB RAM  
32MB DirectX8.1 3D Video Card  
1.7Gb HDD

### WANT

PIII-800 or equivalent CPU  
256MB RAM  
62 MB DirectX8.1 3D Video Card  
1.7Gb HDD

### MULTIPLAYER

No

### ONLINE

[www.tolkiencollect.com/bilbobal.htm](http://www.tolkiencollect.com/bilbobal.htm)  
Leonard Nimoy, arguably the greatest singer/songwriter ever, serenades possibly fiction's greatest midget, Bilbo Baggins, in this heartfelt ode. You may have heard the song before but have you seen the film clip?

**W**ith the recent rise to pop-culture stardom of Tolkien, it was inevitable that some developer would again try their hand at bringing one of his most beloved and widely read books to life in a game. Chronicling the adventures of a young Hobbit by the name of Bilbo Baggins employed as a burglar by a group of Dwarves and accompanied by the mysterious but friendly wizard, Gandalf the Grey, *The Hobbit* takes a departure from last year's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (also released by Vivendi), opting to take the route of a narrative adventure/platformer and coming off much better for it. Although undoubtedly a game aimed for a younger audience there is still a lot of fun for older gamers in this charming little slice of fantasy.

Each level of *The Hobbit* is extrapolated from an area or event described in the book, filled with platforms and pitfalls and populated with a variety of enemies ranging from carnivorous plants to wolves, orcs, giant spiders and the like. Each level also comes to a quite satisfying conclusion with a fairly easy but still entertaining boss battle, each requiring a special gimmick to defeat. To help Bilbo defeat his myriad enemies, players can use one of three weapons, each with their own special abilities that need to be utilised to successfully complete the game. Initially Bilbo is equipped with a stout walking stick good for cracking unfriendly skulls. Although relatively weak as far as damage goes, the stick can also be used to add distance to jumps

with a pole vault style move. Later on Bilbo finds Sting, an ancient Elven blade that glows blue when orcs are near. Sting does a good amount of damage as well as illuminating dark areas. Finally Bilbo is an expert in throwing rocks and always keeps a pouch handy. Basic rocks don't do too much damage but hitting an enemy from behind with a rock can cause an instant kill and a number of special limited time powers such as a fire and freeze are dotted around the levels to be found by those with a taste for exploration. Also hidden throughout the game are training scrolls that will raise Bilbo's combat abilities, either increasing weapon damage or allowing for longer combos. By and large the combat is fairly shallow but it does break up the platforming sections nicely. Controls are







Aargh! It's turned into  
Dungeon Siege!

## IS THAT YOU LINK?

Aside from killing monsters, Bilbo can collect a number of items as well as gold to buy new equipment between levels and crystals that slowly increase the hero's health. If this sounds familiar to you rest assured you're not alone. Anyone who has played a Legend of Zelda game will most likely find the game remarkably familiar, right down to the charge up spinning sword attack. Imitation is said to be the sincerest form of flattery, and considering how good the source material is, the developer could have gone a lot further wrong looking for inspiration.



Being a hobbit means  
walking twice as far.



## Initially Bilbo is equipped with a stout walking stick good for cracking unfriendly skulls and used to add distance to jumps with a pole vault style move

good for the most part but occasionally show their console heritage by having some unnecessarily obtuse keyboard commands - when activating puzzles the player must use the arrow keys to select items instead of the WASD control keys or the mouse used for every other action.

### Trial by water

In platformers, level design is king as it basically equates to gameplay - there's only so much jumping that people will be willing to do if the level design is terrible. For the most part The Hobbit features excellent level design with fantastic and sufficiently complex jumping puzzles to navigate. The Goblin Mines area perfect example of this; the level itself is absolutely huge, contains a number of objectives and never once falls into the trap of having impossible to gauge dead-drops, instant death traps or similar downfalls that seem to plague



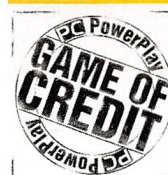
most platformers. That doesn't mean to say that the game is without flaws. It's not. Whilst the majority of the levels are well designed every now and then comes a bit so frustrating that you want to pull your hair out in frustration. Water is a prime example. Bilbo is more than capable of walking in shallow water and wading in slightly deeper stuff but as in many platform games he is totally incapable of swimming. Deep water spells instant death for the enterprising little hobbit but actually judging the depth of water is somewhat hard to do, leading to quite a number of otherwise easily avoidable deaths and restarts. A few of the levels also contain stealth elements. Whilst there's nothing wrong with the inclusion of these (Bilbo is a thief after all) the camera angles often make it difficult to judge guard routes and can often obscure enemies to such a degree that the first few attempts at the level will be little more than trial and error. Frustratingly enough, when Bilbo finds the one ring and gains the ability to turn invisible for short periods of time, stealth takes a back seat to platforming and combat.

As the screens can fully attest, The Hobbit looks dated but that does not mean to say that it doesn't have a charm of its own. The character design will be recognisable to anyone who has seen the

1977 Rankin-Bass Hobbit animated movie. Although the design isn't identical, both the film and the game have a bright colour palette and a penchant for characters with big eyes and bushy eyebrows. It's not the most mature aesthetic in the world but it does have a certain naïve appeal. The animations are very good for the most part, though most of the death animations could do with a bit more work, and the engine can churn out a respectable and steady framerate at higher resolutions. Although certainly direct and to the point, the still cutscenes leave a fair bit to be desired, often glossing over an important or interesting plot detail (such as Gandalf tricking the trolls into arguing until the sun comes up so they turn into stone). Sound follows the same route of mixing the good in with the average with some excellent voice acting combined with a fairly generic fantasy score and sound effects that range from being fantastic to really quite terrible. At heart The Hobbit, like the book it was made from is aimed squarely at younger audience but if you're willing to overlook the dated looking engine and cutesy nature of the character design there's a remarkably fun if somewhat familiar platformer lying underneath.

Daniel Wilks

### RATING



#### FOR

Addictive  
Faithful  
Varied missions

#### AGAINST

Linear  
Drowning  
Controls

#### OVERALL

It's not going to give you too many sleepless nights but The Hobbit is still a nice and diverting piece of Middle Earth gaming.

# 71









Magnus polishes his cockpit.



# Yager

Finally, a hero more obnoxious than Howard the Duck

Developer: Yager Development ■ Publisher: THQ ■ Distributor: THQ ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

**B**efore we start with the review proper, allow me a quick word to the developer. It's all well and good to have the hero as a non-conformist who plays by his own rules and won't take any crap from anybody - the dashing rogue is one of the staple archetypes used in nearly every form of entertainment. Look at some of the great examples from the history of games and movies - Han Solo, Jimmy the Saint, Sly Boots, hell, even Max Payne fits the bill (although he is without the sense of humour usually associated with the archetype). The thing that all of these characters have in common is that they are, in their own way, very likeable. Not so Magnus Tide, the main character in Yager. He is, for want of a more damning term, and arse full of sarcasm and

unwarranted sexual innuendo without any real charm to back it up, making the player want to jump through their CRT and punch the bastard in the face every time he opens his stupid mouth. PCPP hereby dubs Magnus Tide the most obnoxious character of 2003.

Luckily the rest of the game is almost good enough to make you forget about Magnus. Set some time in the not too distant future, Tide, a mercenary pilot by trade signs on for a job and flies a number of missions with objectives ranging from shoot down everything that moves to blowing up enemy submarines or rescuing innocent civilians. It's not particularly deep in the story department and the action does have the habit of becoming a bit repetitive, but it's still solid enough to keep your attention for a few days at least.

## Flight nuances

The developer has done quite a decent port from Xbox, managing to keep the spectacular graphics without the strange ramping up of system specs that seems to plague many ports. The controls have been well optimised for keyboard and use the standard WASD/mouse controls for the most part (though there are some curious default key placements). The

## AURAL PLEASURE

As you may have guessed from the opening diatribe, Magnus Tide is a dick in the script. Although his dialogue leaves so much to be desired, the voice acting for the majority of characters is actually very good, as are the lion's share of the sound effects. The only real disappointments are the weapon effects and explosions, both of which never sound substantial enough to give the impression of high tech aerial warfare.

flight model used for the vehicles is quite unusual and definitely takes some getting used to. Aside from being able to fly in jet mode, Tide's ship can also enter a hover mode allowing him to stay in one spot or strafe. Once mastered, the nuances of both modes come in very handy during the nearly omnipresent search and destroy missions throughout the game.

Aside from Magnus Tide himself, there is one flaw in Yager that stops it from being an absolute must have - the AI. Although friendly AI plays nice most of the time, it's not a rare occurrence for a friendly ship to crash into you, doing a heap of damage as well as push you out of firing line. Likewise, the enemy will often crash into you, yet still manage to manoeuvre in ways not possible in our physical universe.

If you're not looking for too much depth in your shooting then Yager should definitely warrant a look-see. Just don't go expecting it to be the next Wing Commander or Privateer and you shouldn't be too disappointed.

Daniel Wilks

## SYSTEM

### NEED

PIII 1GHz CPU or equivalent  
256Mb RAM  
64Mb 3D Video Card  
3Gb HDD

### WANT

P4 2GHz CPU or equivalent  
512Mb RAM  
128Mb 3D Video Card  
3Gb HDD

### MULTIPLAYER

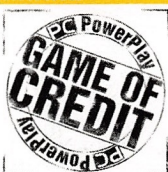
No

### ONLINE

[www.chuckyeager.com](http://www.chuckyeager.com)

OK, the spelling is a bit different but here's the homepage of the world's coolest Yeager, Chuck Yeager, the living legend of aviation

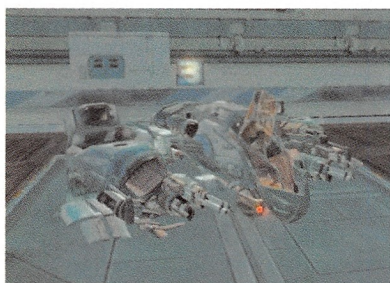
## RATING



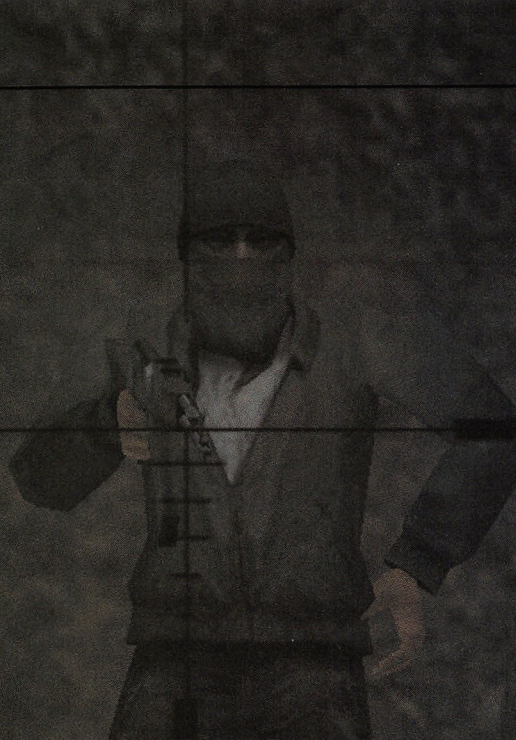
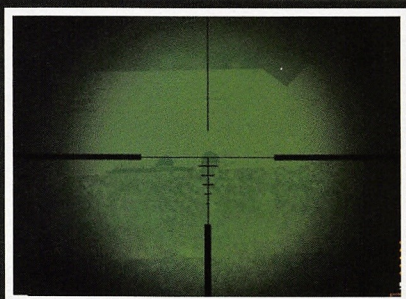
### OVERALL

Not a flight sim nor a space shooter, Yager is still fun if you don't go expecting too much.

69







# CTU Marine Sharpshooter

C4I\lp3r U r fgt!

Developer: Jarhead Games ■ Publisher: Groove ■ Distributor: Red Ant ■ Price: Faith in Army training? ■ Rating: MA 15+ ■ Available: Now

## SYSTEM

### NEED

To get your head examined

### WANT

To put the CD in the microwave and make a coaster

### MULTIPLAYER

No

### ONLINE

[www.jarheadgames.com](http://www.jarheadgames.com)

Why is it that the site looks far more professional and high budget than any of their games? Send them some hate mail from me while you're there.

**I**t is reported that the wonderfully witty columnist Dorothy Parker once broke a war veteran into a fit of childlike tears with her scathing review of his book. I unfortunately am not possessed by her wit or sharp tongue so will have to resort to spending the next 450 or so words belittling the sexual prowess and endowment of the creators of the abysmally brown stinker CTU Marine Sharpshooter, the perhaps aptly titled Jarhead Games. As the oh-so creative title subtly hints, CTU Marine Sharpshooter casts the player as a sharpshooter and has them snipe a bunch of unholy accurate and well-camouflaged foes in flat brown, green or white levels whilst trying to keep your special school trained "Spotter" from either being killed, walking off a cliff or straying into your sights whilst you're trying to take out the enemy.

## Exotica

A quick perusal of the back of the box reveals that CTU Marine Sharpshooter has "10 expansive missions that span 3 exotic locales; Afghanistan, Chechnya and a remote South Pacific Island". A word of advice - if a travel agent ever tries to pass off Afghanistan or Chechnya as exotic holiday locales then you should seek out your local ombudsman and have the business shut down. The term expansive used to describe the missions is also a bit misleading - whilst the levels themselves appear quite large the area in which the action is confined is quite small and painfully linear. To make matters worse, straying outside the designated mission area results in instant death without any real warning and appears to happen far too frequently to be anything less than a deliberate bit of coding and justification for the quicksave function. The bulk of the action of the so-called game takes the form



of taking out as many enemies as possible at a long distance - you are meant to be playing a sniper and all. Whilst the idea of playing an entire game as a sniper is certainly an intriguing one and in the hands of a bunch of barely competent monkeys could have been good, such is not the case here. The problem lies in the enemy AI that is, as stated above, supernaturally capable of spotting a hidden sniper (even in the dark without the aid of night vision) and accurate at extreme range with whatever weapon they are equipped with. Ultimately most of the levels become more endurable if the player ditches the idea of being a sniper and simply doing the good old run and gun with a pistol.

If the above sounds bad it all pales in comparison to what should have been the most interesting part of the game, the AI Spotter. Anyone with an interest in the

## BROWN WORLD

It's customary to make at least one polite comment about basically any game being reviewed no matter how crap, so here goes nothing. When you can actually see what is going on, CTU Marine Sharpshooter actually doesn't look too bad. Now that's out of the way we can safely say that the rest of the time it looks like the inside of a used nappy - various shades of unappetising brown in which some vague detail can be discerned but you don't really care to look any further. To aid in seeing more details, Jarhead has kindly implemented a night vision system that helpfully makes everything a sickly shade of green that is no easier to see in than the brown darkness. The back of the box shows levels set in the jungle and snow but unless you have the patience of a saint of love pain you'll never have the displeasure of seeing them.

military would have an idea that a Spotter is both the bodyguard and eyes of a sniper, helping protect them from close assault as well as picking out potential targets. The spotter in CTU does neither. What he does instead is wander around aimlessly, fire his weapon mindlessly, never seeming to hit anything even when the law of averages states otherwise, wanders off the edge of tall things, pushes you out from cover or worst of all, stands right in front of you when you try to take a shot. Whilst killing the retarded bastard is satisfying it also means that you have to play through the same interminable level again as his death means the end of the game. Fun huh?

Daniel Wilks

## RATING



### OVERALL

I just realised I forgot to make fun of their sexual prowess and penis size. Damn.

24





# Law & Order: Dead on the Money

Watch or play? That is the question...

Developer: Legacy Interactive ■ Publisher: The Adventure Company ■ Distributor: QV Software ■ Price: \$69.95 ■ Rating: M15+ ■ Available: Now

**A**dventure game – phooey! Puzzle game, perhaps, but does three simplistic puzzles make a game? Hardly.

Click here, Click there, it's more like the memory game that some of us still have on our out dated mobile phones. Look mummy, I clicked a few pictures and they made me a detective and it's only my first day on the job!

It may be highly cynical to see this game as a cash in during a time when there is a swelling market demanding more 'real life' crime stories. Yes, sci-fi is yesterday and the dinosaurs are done, the 'now' is crime scene investigation and cornering the crim.

If you are a fan of the long running television series then this game might be for you, if not, it is probably time to turn the page. Written by a Law & Order series writer the story and feel of the game is true to the essence of the television show to the point where some cut-scenes feel more like an episode than the story you are playing along with. Detective Lennie Briscoe is at



**Look mummy, I clicked a few pictures and they made me a detective and it's only my first day on the job**

your side to aid you with his wit through the investigation as you collect evidence and interview witnesses. Later, the lovely Assistant DA, Serena Southerlyn, will help you secure a guilty verdict from a jury of your peers.

The first half of the game is the most interesting. You send items to the crime lab, request search warrants, put people under surveillance, and try to build a case against one of the numerous suspects. These tasks can be made easier by the choice of strengths (evidence collection, interviewing, teamwork and efficiency) made at the beginning of the game, as your decision will effect how the case plays out. Given that this is a timed game and you have no room for error, efficiency should be your first choice as it slows down time. You have seven eight-hour days to arrest someone and then two days in the second section of the game to make your case airtight. Without using efficiency, this limit is just too restrictive.

There is a ton of evidence that can be collected, but little is useful. Differentiating these at the beginning is near to impossible.

And when you find an object at the scene of the crime? It takes a slot. If you analyse that object? It takes another slot. In other words, 52 slots aren't enough. If you throw out an object at any point in the game it is not retrievable without returning to a past save and then you have to replay that section - however long it might be - over again.

The mechanics of the game are frustrating and clumsy and with only one case to solve there isn't reason to return to the game to complete the clues any quicker than your first attempt.

As the game wears on (and this isn't a very long game) pacing became the biggest problem with each object taking 15 minutes of real-time to be analysed. This is not a problem early in the game when you are still trying to work through the interface and what to do with the evidence, but later on it becomes a pain as you'll find yourself having to get up and walk away while waiting on vital results.

For me the game would be improved by allowing the player to be part of the analysis process and by having a lot less damn CLICKING!

## SLEUTHING SKILLS

You can pick two of the following skills for your detective:

**Evidence Collection** gives you a hot spot icon that appears when placed over a object that maybe a piece of evidence. Or it may just be a piece of rubbish. That's why it was in the bin. Interviewing removes the stupidest of the three question options so you don't ask what colour their blue suit is. **Teamwork** gets you a prod in the arm and a bit of advice from your partner. **Efficiency** throws you into "bullet time" or, in other words, gives you more time to solve the case. Take your time. The victim is already dead and this could make or break your career!

## SYSTEM

### NEED

P2-400MHz  
96MB RAM  
8MB video card  
700MB HDD

### WANT

Nothing special

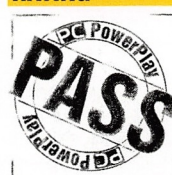
### MULTIPLAYER

No

### ONLINE

[www.geocities.com/televisioncity/1893](http://www.geocities.com/televisioncity/1893)  
The official unofficial Jerry Orbach page

## RATING



### OVERALL

More for fans of the TV series than for fans of quality games

# 54



# TECH IN REVIEW

**G**reetings my fine geek friends,

It's that time of the year once again, when we all get to kick our heels up for a couple of weeks, drink copious amounts of brain crumpling alcohol and receive a whole new inventory for our socks and undies draw.

However, if you've played your cards right throughout the year, hopefully your Chrissy stocking contained at least one new piece of hardware or software that you've been pining for over the last couple of months.

That's one of the great things about being a gamer. While most adults have to grow out of the whole Christmas = copious amounts of free toys gig, gamers have a totally valid excuse for receiving toys regardless of how old they are. For some reason it's not ok to give a 27 year old guy soldier figurines (Go Joe!), but it's perfectly reasonable to give them a game where they get to play with animated 3D models of soldiers. Go figure.

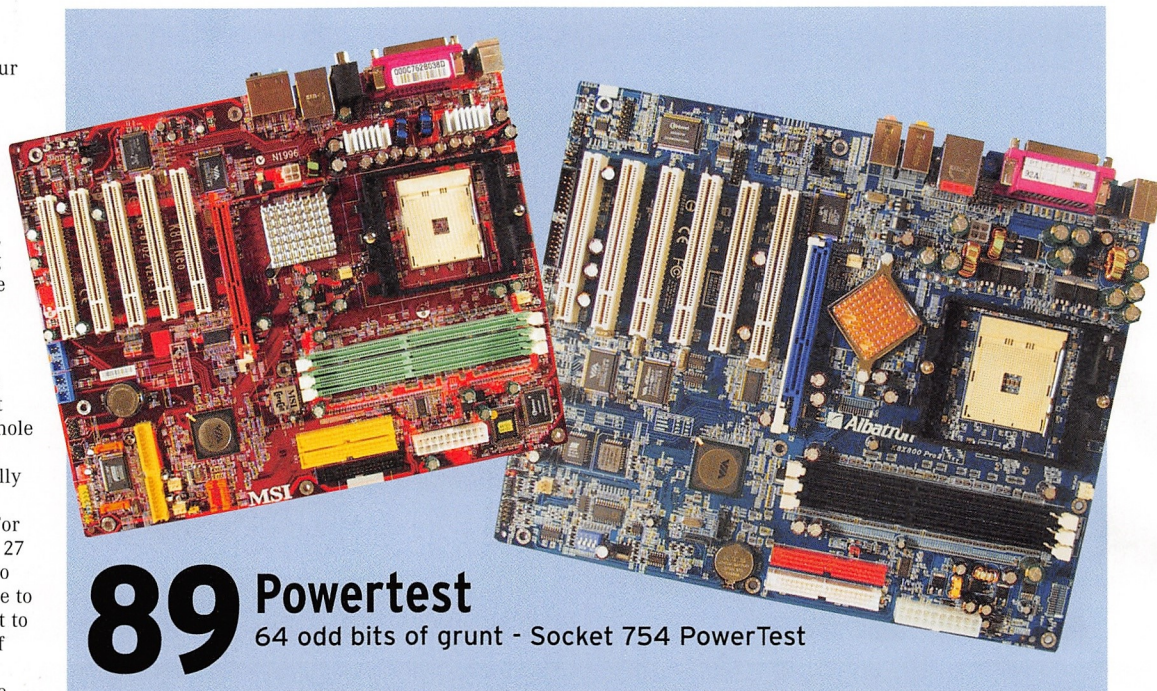
And not only do we have some sweet new games to play this festive season, we've got some pretty fine hardware to play them on. Check out Asher's 9800XT vs 5950 piece to see the fastest cards from ATI and NVIDIA having a go at each other. I'd be very hesitant to purchase either though, as the architecture in use on both of these is getting a little long in the tooth, with brand new chips due out early next year from both of these companies.

I was lucky enough to remain sane after testing a wad of new Athlon 64 motherboards; unlike the pain free P4 mobo PowerTest I did a couple of months ago, several of the boards in this month's roundup proved to be a right royal pain in

the ass. With any luck the upcoming Christmas beerathon should erase these troublemakers from my memory.

Anyway, enough of my ranting. May you and your loved ones have a very merry Christmas, and I'll see y'all in the New Year!

**Bennett Ring**  
Deputy Editor,  
[bennetttr@next.com.au](mailto:bennetttr@next.com.au)



## 89 Powertest

64 odd bits of grunt - Socket 754 PowerTest

- 96 Philips HG100 Headphones/Sony DR-260USB headphones
- 98 MSI Mega Stick/Sony VPL-HS3 projector
- 100 Adpatec 1210SA/Minitar Giga Switch combo
- 102 Abit DigiDice
- 103 MS Executive Edition mouse and keyboard/Gigabyte GO-M1600A

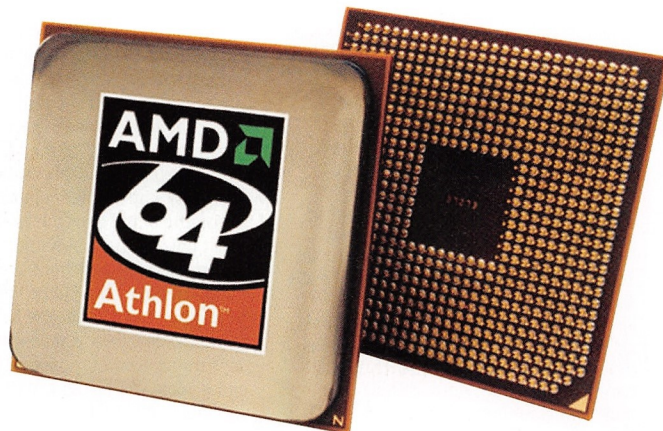
### HOW WE TESTED

For an in-depth explanation of how we test video cards, CPUs, and motherboards head to our PowerTools section on page 104. You'll also see a list of hardware that makes up the PCPP testbenches, which are used for the testing of the majority of our hardware.

Where possible we use benchmarks based on real world games to test hardware performance; this way we know for sure which component will give you the best gaming experience. We don't love hardware for hardware's sake - it's all about using this hardware to make your

entertainment even more, well, entertaining. We also try to compare the review product with the current "best of class" piece of hardware, so at the end of the day you'll know exactly which product offers you the best bang for buck.

For a product to earn a Power Award, price be damned, we're just looking at how this product performs. If there's nothing better, that we've seen at least, it'll get the Power Award. However, if a product offers a great level of performance or features for a very reasonable price, it'll get the Value Award. Simple, really.







**GRUNT FACTOR**

**T**he Athlon 64 is the shiznit, the bomb, the shizzle. Who cares if the 3200+ only runs at a meagre 2GHz, when it still runs rings around the 3.2GHz Pentium 4, proving that a smart architecture means a whole lot more than raw frequency. And the fact that it's a 64-bit processor is meaningless without any 64-bit software; we're just impressed by the fact that it still kicks ass and takes names when running 32-bit apps.

With the launch of this new processor comes a veritable swag of new chipsets. There's the K8T800 from VIA, the nForce 3 from NVIDIA and some other chipsets from ALI and SiS that weren't released so shall choose to pretend

# 64 odd bits of Grunt

## Socket 754 Motherboard PowerTest

If you're lucky enough to own an Athlon 64, **Bennett Ring** has the motherboard for you





don't exist. And with plenty of motherboards based around these chipsets now hitting shelves, it could mean only one thing. Bring on the Athlon 64, Socket-754 motherboard PowerTest! How's that for a catchy PowerTest title?

The main difference between the nForce 3 and K8T800 chipsets is in the form of the HyperTransport link, the system bus between the CPU and the chipset. In the K8T800 this runs at a blazing 1.6GHz (800MHz double pumped), running in a fully duplex 16-bit mode. Compare this to NVIDIA's offering, which runs at 1.2GHz (600MHz double pumped) in an asynchronous 16/8-bit mode, and we see that on paper the VIA chipset provides for considerably more bandwidth across the HyperTransport link.

Those who like to squeeze every last ounce of performance out of their CPUs will appreciate another major difference between the two. PCI and AGP frequency locking is only available on the nForce 3 chipset, even though VIA swore black and blue that this feature would be available on the K8T800. Unfortunately it's not, making the nForce 3 boards more attractive to the overclocking scene, but keep in mind that regardless of which mobo you use, you're not going to be able to overclock the 3200+ by much – this baby simply isn't a great overclocker. Yet. And you'll now have to make use of the tried and tested frontside bus overclock method when overclocking these new AMD chips, as the ability to adjust multipliers isn't yet available in publicly available BIOS.

Finally, the other major variance between the two is the functionality offered by the southbridge. In the case of the VIA K8T800 chipset, the VT8237 southbridge is most commonly used, offering eight USB 2.0 ports, four IDE devices, and

between two and four SATA drives. The nForce 3 chipset uses the NVIDIA MCP (media and communications processor), which supports six USB 2.0 ports, and a total of six IDE and SATA drives combined. Special souped up versions of these chipsets are also available with integrated Gigabit Ethernet, and several of the boards in our roundup included this power feature.

pack one, DX9.0b and the ATI Catalyst 3.8 drivers.

We decided to use the same benchmarks for this motherboard PowerTest as our previous Intel 865PE/875P roundup. First off the ranks was the venerable UT2K3 CPU test, followed by a dash of 3DMark03's CPU test, and ending up with SiSoft Sandra's memory benchmark.

The final test was the

**“...you're not going to be able to overclock the 3200+ by much – this baby simply isn't a great overclocker.”**

### Bring on the benchmarks

Before testing, all motherboards were flashed to the publicly available BIOS at the beginning of November. We were offered special 'review' BIOS versions that allowed such trickery as multiplier manipulation, but decided these were irrelevant if they're not going to be available to you guys. An Athlon 3200+ CPU along with our standard test bench components were strapped in for the ride, finishing off with a clean install of Windows XP Pro, with service

overclockability of each motherboard. For this test we simply increased the frontside bus in 5MHz increments until the machine would no longer run the UT2K3 benchmark successfully. We tried lowering the memory ratio and increasing the CPU voltage, but these appeared to have no effect on the overall overclock limit of each board. BIOS options were set to the pre-configured performance option, as manual fine tuning of the memory timings resulted in more than one hosed Windows install.

## Abit KV8-MAX3

• Price: \$358 • Distributor: Altech [www.altech.com.au](http://www.altech.com.au) • URL: Abit [www.abit.com.tw](http://www.abit.com.tw)

I'm sorry, but the OTES cooling solution, which is one of this board's biggest features, just doesn't do it for me. There's no proof that it will actually lengthen the lifetime of your board, which is why it's there in the first place, and the fact that I had to remove it to install the CPU HSF simply bugged the shit out of me. And who wants yet another unnecessary fan, helping to make your PC sound more like a buzzing bee hive?

But what I do like is the fact that this is one of the most feature packed boards in the roundup, and it would want to be considering it costs a smidge under \$400. A whopping six SATA connectors are provided, and the inclusion of ABIT's Secure IDE encryption will be welcomed by the paranoid twacker who doesn't want anybody searching through their hard drives without permission. To fill these drives at your next filefest, the included Gigabit Ethernet port will

no doubt come in handy, and you'll also be able to suck down data via six USB 2.0 and three FireWire ports. The onboard sound is noteworthy for its inclusion of optical SPDIF in and out – a rarity for integrated sound.

Backing up this hefty feature list are some very respectable performance levels. The KV8-MAX3 took out second place in both the UT2K3 and 3DMark03 tests, although getting it to perform at all was a bit of a drama. The problem lay in the optimised defaults for the BIOS – enabling this resulted in an unbootable mess, requiring us to go

through and try each performance setting one at a time, and this was the only board in the PowerTest requiring this level of attention.

ABIT are known as one of the leading overclocking oriented brands, so it was more than a little surprising to see that this board could only muster 210MHz, bringing our CPU up to a speed of 2.1GHz. In fact, this meant the board shared the dubious honour of being the worst overclocker with a couple of the other boards.

However, in real world terms this only resulted in a 100Mhz difference in the frequency of the CPU, so it's no biggie, and the ability to do all of the overclocking via ABIT's Windows overclocking application, called Guru, was a nice touch.

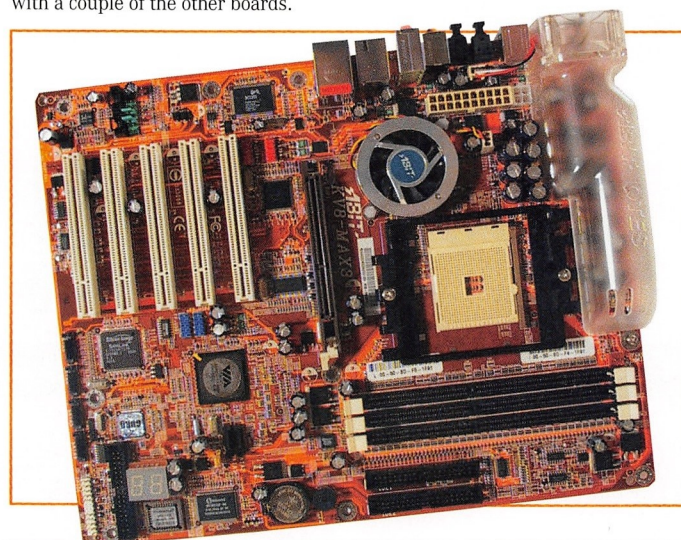
Sure, the KV8-MAX3 isn't cheap, but it's packed to the brim with cool stuff, and performs like a bat out of hell. Pity about the overclocking performance though...

### SPECIFICATIONS

- VIA K8T800 chipset
- Gigabit LAN
- OTES cooling
- 6 x SATA connectors (RAID 0/1/0+1)
- 3 x memory slots
- SPDIF in/out
- 6-channel AC 97 onboard sound

PCPP Score

Perf: 4.5/5 Features 4.5/5 Overall 4/5





# Albatron K8X800 Pro II

• Price: \$262 • Distributor: Australia IT [www.australiait.com.au](http://www.australiait.com.au) • URL: Albatron [www.albatron.com.tw](http://www.albatron.com.tw)

**M**otherboard roundups suck monkey anus. Dirty monkey anus at that. They're easily the most difficult, finicky and frustrating roundup type that a hardware reviewer can take on. Which is why I really appreciated the K8X800 Pro II from Albatron - I didn't even need to open the manual to set it up, and within minutes this little baby was up and running. No need to go fudging around with different BIOS settings, or messing around with various components and trying different ports to get the show on the road. So if you're looking for a board that's easy to set up, I can highly recommend Albatron's offering.

Don't be fooled into thinking this ease of setup was a side effect of minimal features though, as this board has all of the goodies you'd expect for the price. Unfortunately there are only two SATA connectors, but the inclusion of a speediferous Gigabit Ethernet port is very impressive for a motherboard this

cheap. Likewise with the Optical out and SPDIF in/out, which we weren't expecting on a board of this price. If you like to plug things into your motherboard, and let's face it who doesn't, you'll love the eight USB 2.0 ports and two FireWire ports that this board ships with. Unlike many of the noisier competing boards, the K8X800 uses a passive copper northbridge heatsink, making this motherboard ideal for the aurally aware.

Performance was equally respectable. It came out in the middle of the pack for our UT2K3 and 3DMark03 tests, which in the real world means it's only a few percentage points slower than the crowd leaders. Overclocking was

also respectable, peaking out at 215Mhz, bringing the 2GHz 3200+ CPU up to a speed of 215MHz, which isn't too far off the maximum speed of 2.2GHz that seemed to be our chip's ceiling.

The K8X800 Pro II has a nice rounded feature list, a very reasonable price and respectable performance, but it was the fact

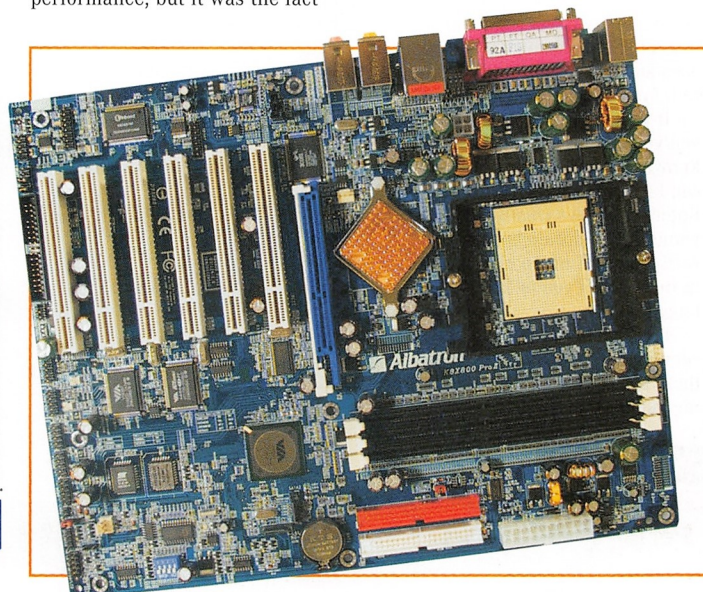
that it worked straight out of the box that endeared this motherboard to us.

## SPECIFICATIONS

- VIA K8T800 chipset
- Gigabit LAN
- 2 x SATA connectors (RAID 0,1)
- 3 x memory slots
- Optical out
- SPDIF in/out

PCPP Score

Perf: 3.5/5 Features 4/5 Overall 4/5



# Aopen AK86-L

• Price: \$329 • Distributor: BlueChip IT [www.bluechipit.com.au](http://www.bluechipit.com.au) • URL: Aopen [www.aopen.com](http://www.aopen.com)

**I**'ve always thought of Aopen as being a brand targeted at the budget minded gamer. You know the type; they survive on copious amounts of two minute noodles and haven't bought new undies since 1986. So you can imagine my surprise, nay amazement, when I saw the \$330 price tag of the AK86-L - aimed at the lower minions this board certainly is not.

For such a high price tag I expected to see this board's PCB packed to the hilt with a hundred and one different drive ports, more USB ports than there have ever been USB products created, and possibly a Freon powered beer cooler. Boy was I wrong.

Yes, it's got Gigabit Ethernet, but that's about it. It also has eight USB 2.0 ports, which is pretty much the standard for Athlon 64 motherboards. However, if you're looking to set up a couple of Terabytes of hard drive space, sadly you're going to find the meagre two

SATA connectors aren't up to the task. It's also lacking in IDE ports, with only two to satisfy your driving urge. Want some FireWire lovin'? Too bad Sonny Jim, as Aopen didn't deem this a necessary inclusion. So they're charging \$330 for what exactly?

It must be stratospheric performance, right? Wrong again. In both the UT2K3 and 3DMark03 tests this motherboard trailed the pack, placing third last in both benchmarks. It wasn't too shabby at overclocking, hitting a maximum frontside bus of 215MHz, and the ability to overclock from the Windows desktop is rather tasty, but again this is a feature that can be found on more feature packed, cheaper

motherboards. There's also a nice little display upon booting of all of your system critical settings, such as AGP speed and voltage, but this kind of feature doesn't cost anything to implement.

Possibly the only redeeming feature of this board, considering the high asking price, is the ease with which we could set it up. Like the Albatron board before it, the

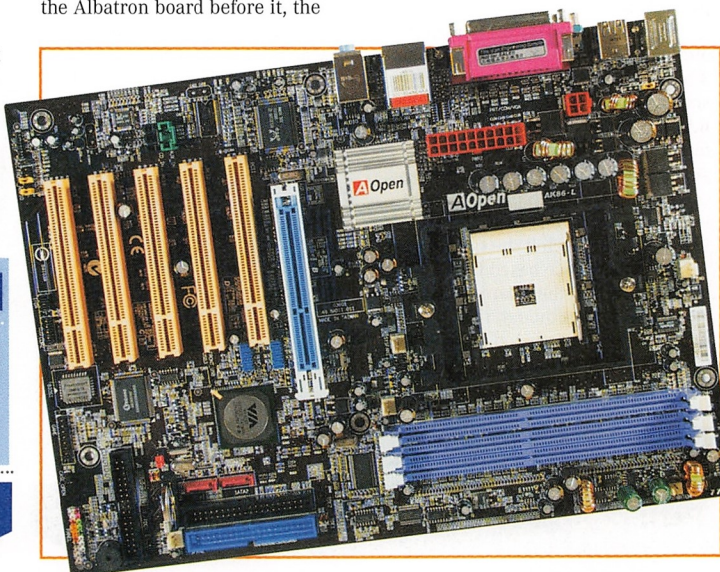
Aopen didn't require any TLC to get it to run smoothly. Which is always a good thing, but is it worth paying over \$300 for? Methinks not.

## SPECIFICATIONS

- VIA K8T800 chipset
- Gigabit LAN
- 2 x SATA connectors (RAID 0,1)
- 3 x memory slots
- AC 97 onboard sound

PCPP Score

Perf: 3.5/5 Features 3.5/5 Overall 3/5





# Gigabyte K8NNX

• Price: \$299 • Distributor: Synnex [www.synnex.com.au](http://www.synnex.com.au) • URL: Gigabyte [www.gigabyte.com.tw](http://www.gigabyte.com.tw)

**O**k, I'll say it right now – this motherboard rocks. Harder than granite. Here's why.

If you can overlook the lack of SATA ports, you'll be hard pressed to find a more feature packed mobo. For starters, there's Gigabyte's unique 6-phase power supply daughter board, which supposedly provides a more stable, cleaner power supply to your motherboard. Bugged if we know if it actually does anything, but it's got a spinning LED fan on it, so it must be good.

If you've ever done a BIOS flash, you've experienced the fear of knowing that if you stuff it up, you can kiss your motherboard goodbye. Enter Gigabyte's DualBIOS – hose your BIOS and there's a backup ready and waiting to kick in, which in turn allows you to fix up the bugged one.

RAID on both the SATA and IDE connections is also on offer, and there's even dual Ethernet ports. The ingenious inclusion of two network

ports allows you to use your PC as a network Gateway without having to install two network cards – a very nice little touch.

Another innovative touch is the use of Universal Audio Jacks for the speaker outputs and microphone inputs. These allow you to whack your speaker and microphone cables into any old port, and the port will then detect whether or not it's an input or output. Too easy huh?

Just when we thought we couldn't like this board anymore, we saw the performance results. How does top of the pile sound to you? It was fastest in both the

UT2K3 benchmark and the 3DMark03 CPU test, and was within a squirrel's pecker of the lead in the synthetic memory test. It even overclocked well, topping off at 220MHz, making it one of the best boards in the roundup when it comes to overclocking.

What more can we say? This board will make a fine home for

your new Athlon 64 processor, and you won't have to sell the farm to pay for it.

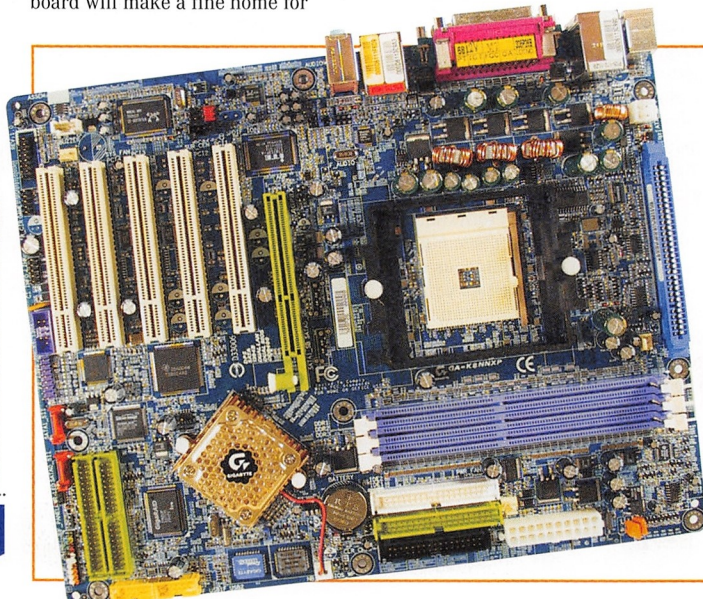


## SPECIFICATIONS

- nForce 3 chipset
- Gigabit LAN
- 10/100 Ethernet
- 2 x SATA connectors (RAID 0,1)
- 4 x IDE connectors (RAID 0,1,0+1)
- Dual power system (6-phase power)
- Dual BIOS

## PCPP Score

Perf: 5/5 Features 4.5/5 Overall 4.5/5



# Gigabyte K8VNX

• Price: \$289 • Distributor: Synnex [www.synnex.com.au](http://www.synnex.com.au) • URL: Gigabyte [www.gigabyte.com.tw](http://www.gigabyte.com.tw)

**T**his board is a very similar beast to the K8VNNXP, with one major exception. Instead of being based around NVIDIA's nForce 3 chipset, the K8VNX instead uses the competing VIA K8T800 chipset. We're not sure why Gigabyte would release two boards that are so similar, but we can't knock them for trying to cover every possible base.

The feature list for this board is almost identical to that of its nForce 3 based brethren; you've got your six phase power, DualBIOS, Dual RAID, and our favourite new feature, Dual Ethernet (one 10/100 port and one Gigabit port). It's got a couple more USB 2.0 ports, at eight instead of six, but other than that it's pretty hard to tell the two apart.

Like the nForce based board, the layout of this motherboard is clean and uncluttered, although the northbridge is a little too close to the CPU socket for our liking. A feature that will be much appreciated by

system builders is the heavy use of colour coding for every port and connector on the board, right down to the pins used for your power, reset and other assorted switches. They'll also like the fact that the AGP port has a locking mechanism, so your brand new ATVIDIA GeForce 9900XT doesn't come flying out the next time you move your PC.

Unfortunately the performance of this board wasn't quite up to the lofty heights set by its bigger brother (we're equating size with price here, and at \$10 more this makes the K8NNXP the bigger brother. Comprende?). This board

was a whopping 6 frames per second slower than the other Gigabyte board in the UT2K3 test, and lagged behind by approximately 4% in the 3DMark03 test. In other words, there's no way in hell that you're going to notice the difference between the two.

Having said that, wouldn't you rather fork out a meagre tenner more for

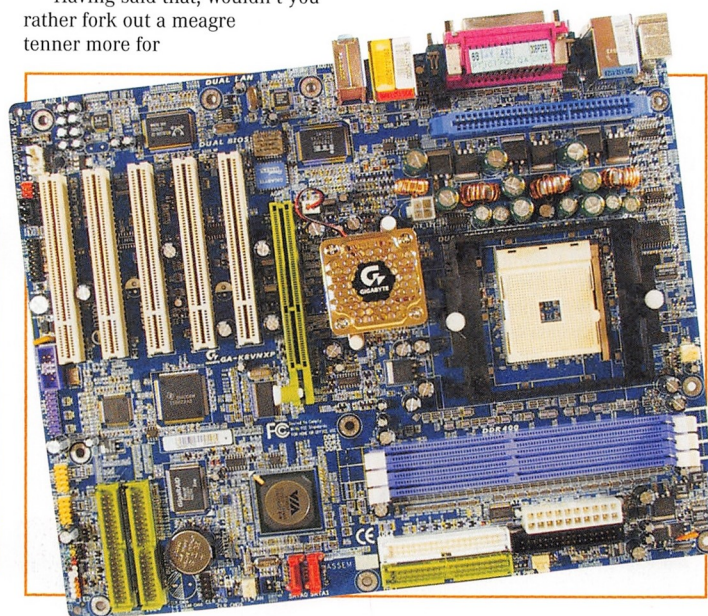
the K8NNXP, just because it's a tiny, eensy weensy bit faster? If you answered yes, give yourself a nice little pat on the back – now we're talking TWEAKIN'!

## SPECIFICATIONS

- VIA K8T800 chipset
- Gigabit LAN
- 10/100 Ethernet
- 2 x SATA connectors (RAID 0,1)
- 4 x IDE connectors (RAID 0,1,0+1)
- Dual power system (6-phase power)
- Dual BIOS

## PCPP Score

Perf: 4.5/5 Features 4.5/5 Overall 4/5





# MSI K8T Neo

• Price: \$299 • Distributor: Ingram Micro [www.ingrammicro.com.au](http://www.ingrammicro.com.au) • URL: MSI [www.msicomputer.com](http://www.msicomputer.com)

Remember how I told you that motherboard roundups weren't exactly a bundle of joy for hardware reviewers? It's motherboards like the MSI K8T Neo that are the reason behind this sweeping statement; this thing was flakier than a leper with a bad case of dandruff.

I thought it might have something to do with the Dynamic Overclocking features of this board, but even with this disabled the board kept shutting itself down whenever a reboot was attempted. It would then require a full CMOS reset before booting up again.

When it comes to features, this board didn't disappoint. As well as your standard inclusions, such as SATA RAID and onboard 5.1 audio, MSI included a couple of features that are unique to their products. The most notable of these is the CoreCell controller, which is basically a hardware monitoring chip. Thanks to this chip you'll be able to overclock from the Windows

desktop, as well as update your BIOS without needing to boot into MS-DOS mode.

Unfortunately the inclusion of this chip didn't make this board the brilliant overclocker that MSI claim it to be. A maximum frontside bus of 210MHz was reached – as soon as we pushed for 215MHz our lovely new Windows install went the way of the dodo.

The performance results for the K8T Neo were a bit of a mixed bag. It did quite well in the UT2K3 test, taking out third place, but then sank to the end of the pack in the 3DMark03 CPU test.

Even if it wasn't so darn flakey we'd still be unable to recommend

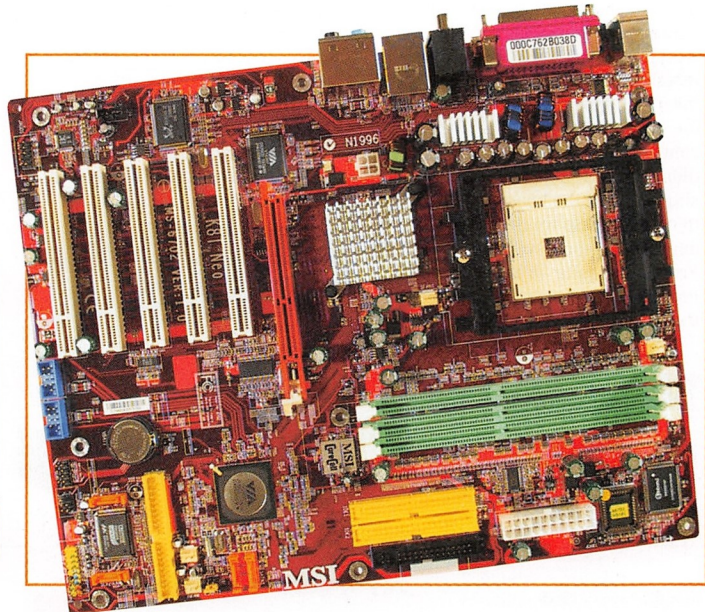
this board. It doesn't overclock too well, performance is patchy, and the feature list isn't quite as impressive as other similarly priced motherboards.

## SPECIFICATIONS

- VIA K8T800 chipset
- Gigabit LAN
- 2 x SATA connectors (RAID 0,1)
- 2 x IDE connectors
- 8 x USB 2.0 ports
- 3 x memory slots
- CoreCell controller

PCPP Score

Perf: 3.5/5 Features 3.5/5 Overall 3.5/5



# Shuttle AN50R

• Price: \$245 • Distributor: SATO [www.satotech.com.au](http://www.satotech.com.au) • URL: Shuttle [www.spacewalker.com](http://www.spacewalker.com)

Shuttle are a brand better known for its SFF (small form factor) PCs than its motherboards, yet it has been making motherboards a hell of a lot longer than the cute mini PCs that gamers have grown to love over the last couple of years. The AN50R is Shuttle's first foray into the Athlon 64 motherboard market, and it's one of the few boards in the roundup that uses NVIDIA's nForce 3 chipset.

Setting up this board was a pain free experience, with no need to tweak or fine tune any of the settings. Simply set the BIOS to optimised defaults, throw in your hardware and away you go. Nice.

If you're after a wealth of connections for your hard drives, the AN50R isn't the board for you, as it only has two IDE and two SATA connectors. However, this is still enough for a total of six drives, and if you've got more drives than this you've probably got other things to worry about, such as the RIAA ;)

The layout of the board is clean and uncluttered, and the passive cooler over the MCP makes for a totally silent board. A generous three FireWire ports are provided courtesy of the VIA 6306 chip, but the I/O options are let down by a meagre four USB 2.0 ports, which simply isn't enough in this day and age of USB everything.

The performance of this board wasn't anything to write home about, taking out the last position in the UT2K3 tests, at around 5% slower than the leader. Again, you won't notice this in the real world, as a performance difference of around 10% and above is necessary for the user to be able to perceive a

difference. Its 3DMark03 CPU test result was also rather lack lustre, taking out the second last position.

Thankfully these very average performance results were balanced out by the overclocking test, with the AN50R hitting a maximum stable frontside bus of 220MHz; one of only three boards in the roundup to do so.

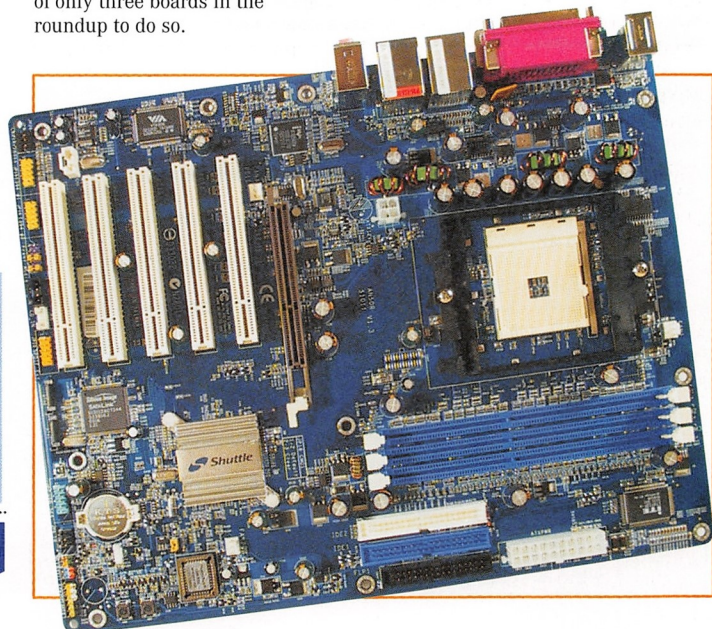
Perhaps the best asset this board has is its price. At \$250 you're not going to find a cheaper Athlon 64 motherboard that is so trouble free, and for this we can forgive it the slightly inferior performance.

## SPECIFICATIONS

- nForce 3 chipset
- Gigabit LAN
- 2 x SATA connectors
- 2 x IDE connectors
- 3 x memory slots
- 3 x FireWire ports

PCPP Score

Perf: 3/5 Features 3/5 Overall 3.5/5





# Soltek SL-K8AV-R

• Price: \$195 • Distributor: Altech [www.altech.com.au](http://www.altech.com.au) • URL: Soltek [www.soltek.com.tw](http://www.soltek.com.tw)

As the cheapest motherboard in the roundup, we weren't expecting great things out of this board. Which is a good thing, as setting up this motherboard soon proved to be the biggest nightmare of the entire PowerTest.

You see, this thing does not like SATA drives. It likes them about as much as most motherboards like being immersed in honey. For starters, during the Windows XP install, at the stage where you must insert a floppy disk with the drivers for your motherboard's SATA controller, this board decided it didn't like the floppy disk (which shipped with the board) and decided to corrupt it. So we then tracked down the latest drivers from the Promise website for the onboard Promise SATA controller, but again this still didn't work. We finally

tried to use some beta drivers supplied to us by the distributor. Surprise, surprise, no go on the SATA show. At this point it was very tempting to hurl the board out of the nearest available window, but decided against it in case some poor schmuck discovered the board and took it home. We're not that heartless nor cruel.

Once we'd given up on installing a SATA drive, choosing to use two crappy old 4GB IDE Quantum Fireballs instead, the board was fine. Sure, it's lacking in features, with no onboard LAN and a total lack of FireWire, but it was stable. Sadly its performance wasn't

## SPECIFICATIONS

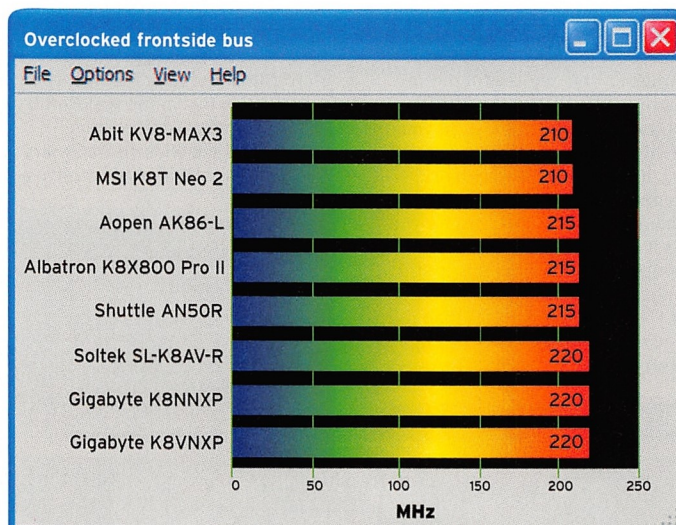
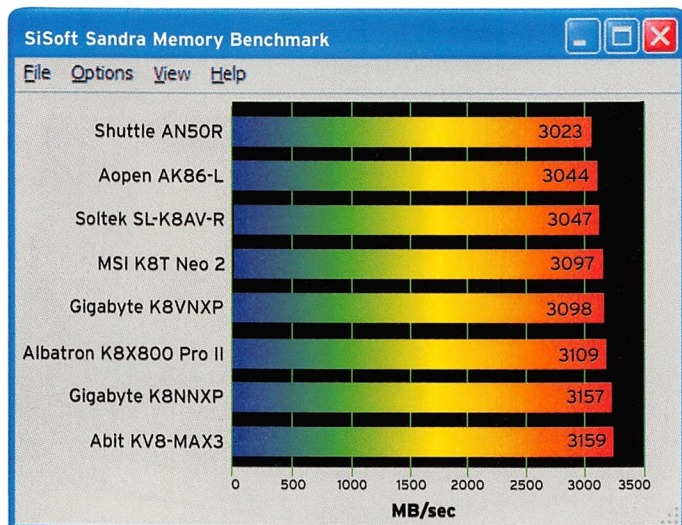
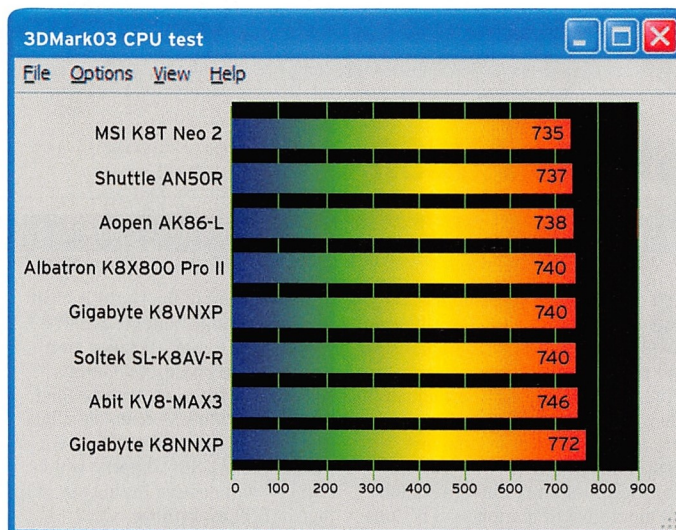
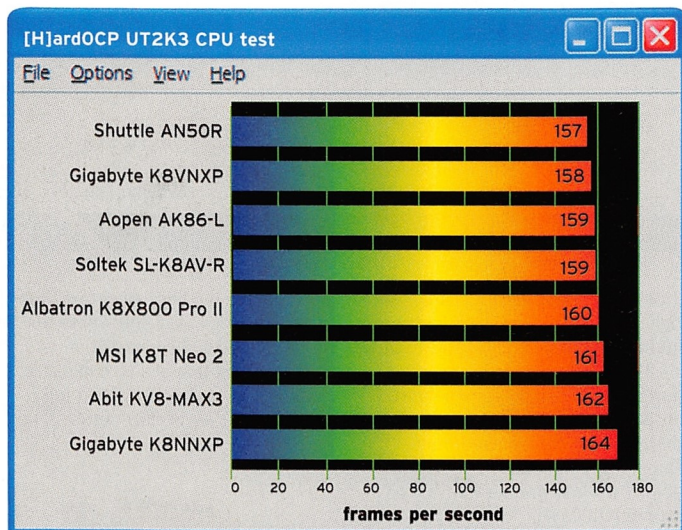
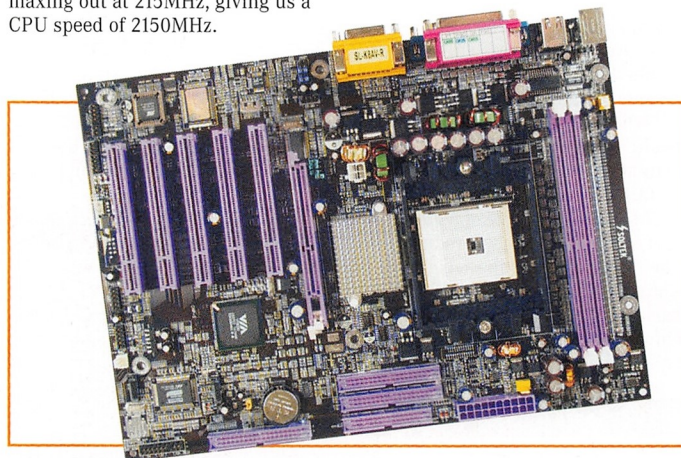
- VIA K8T800 chipset
- 2 x memory slots
- 2 x USB 2.0 ports
- 2 x SATA connectors
- 2 x IDE connectors

## PCPP Score

Perf: 3/5 Features 2.5/5 Overall 2.5/5

impressive, taking out the dubious honour of being the slowest board in the UT2K3 test, and second slowest in the 3DMark03 CPU test. And this isn't just because we were using IDE drives, as both of these benchmarks are run from the system memory, with the hard drive performance having zero impact on the final result. Overclocking results were slightly more promising, maxing out at 215MHz, giving us a CPU speed of 2150MHz.

If you're using IDE drives and are after the cheapest Athlon 64 board around, the SL-K8AV-R does the job, although its performance and features are lacking. But if you're thinking of plugging in that shiny new SATA drive you just bought, stay the hell away from this board unless you're the kind of freak who finds cutting themselves a rippin' good time.





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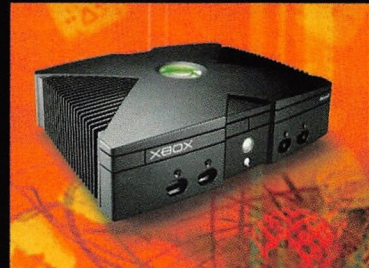
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# Philips HG100 Gaming Headphones

• Price: \$300 • Distributor: Crest Electronics [www.crest.com.au](http://www.crest.com.au) • URL: Philips [www.philips.com.au](http://www.philips.com.au)

**F**eel like rumble? The Philips HG100 Gaming Headphones will not only oblige, but give you a head massage as well. These funky 'phones not only have a boom microphone but also an "active motion sound system with sound enhancers in the neck and around the ears." Well, they're not in the neck I'm pleased to say, but there are extensions that swivel down onto your neck to make sure those 15" shore battery guns don't go unnoticed.

These headphones have the equivalent of force feedback in the earpieces and in the fold down neck extensions. The motors are activated by low-frequency sounds and give a bit of a thump or rumble to your head. This means that a rifle shot in BF1942 won't activate the enhancers, but a tank shot will. Driving a tank gives a continuous rumble that will loosen your cogs without careful adjustment of the level of enhancement. The level is adjusted

by an in-line controller that also controls volume and is thoughtfully provided with a clip. It also contains an AA battery (supplied) to power the enhancers.

The neck enhancers take some getting used to, and it took quite some time to find the right position for them. The headphones themselves are closed-ear style, which helps to keep ambient noise out and the gaming noise in (helpful if you share a room). Sound quality from both the headphones and microphone is very good, with no obvious listening fatigue after an hour. I ran them off an Audigy 2 Platinum and found them suitable

## SPECIFICATIONS

- Connectivity: Analogue soundcard
- Acoustic system: closed
- Impedance: 32 Ohms
- Headset: 40 - 28,000 Hz
- Microphone: 20 - 20,000 Hz
- Cord: 3 m
- Sensitivity: 110 +/-3 dB/mW

## PCPP Score

Some cool ideas, unconventional with good sound, but rather pricey.

**85**

for both gaming and music. The cord was long, flexible and thin, and the control unit was light enough to ignore.

Music with the enhancers gave variable results. "Fall" by Single Gun Theory and just a touch of rumble was very smooth. Anything by Robert Miles will be the equivalent of audio suicide. Music in-game was sometimes a bit of a

challenge, as the enhancers reacted to the bass in the music, rather than to gameplay. This was a bit distracting, and I ended up turning the music off, concentrating on the game instead.

You can buy a lot of headphone for \$300. The question is: do you want extreme audio quality or an interesting gaming experience?

**Andrew Calvin**



# Sony DR-260USB Stereo Headset & Microphone

• Price: \$149.00 • Distributor: Sony Australia Limited [www.sony.com.au](http://www.sony.com.au) • URL: Sony [www.sonymstyle.com.au](http://www.sonymstyle.com.au)

**S**ick of playing Counter-Strike without team chat? Do you use Roger Wilco or TeamSound? Then you need a headphone/microphone combo, and the Sony DR-260USB might be the ticket. Yet it isn't just another headphone/microphone combination. Although you can connect it up using mini jacks like most other models, it offers connectivity via USB. No soundcard at all? No problem. Your laptop's soundcard sucks? You're in business via the USB port. The standard mini jacks plug into a 40 g box that has volume controls for the headphone and microphone. A USB cable connects the box to the PC and the system emulates a sound card. Under Windows XP everything installed automatically and it worked flawlessly; the only catch was that I had to manually mute my speaker system. Another point is that these will use CPU time, so don't try them with a Pentium II.

This headset is open style and quite light, even with the built-in boom microphone. The microphone is on a sturdy ratcheted boom and flips up easily when not in use. It's very quiet, generating low hiss when recording voice, and the reproduction quality is very good. The single-sided cable from the headset to the box is long, thin and flexible, while the USB cable is a little short if your PC lives under the desk. The box is well thought out, with the mic volume recessed to avoid accidental changes. The volume keys are

easy to use in the dark (for you late-nighters) and the mic mute button is large and noiseless.

For a light headset the bass was surprisingly good and Ghost Recon sounded just fine. The sound quality generally was satisfactory for both music and games, and I was able to wear them for extended periods without aural fatigue. An hour-long videoconference over MSN Messenger highlighted the low hiss of the microphone. The

automatic gain control in Messenger often produces loud hiss when the conversation dies away. This microphone reduced that problem substantially and made the chat a lot more pleasurable and natural.

Headphones in this price range are usually of a reasonable quality and these are nearly up there, but have the convenience of a good microphone and the advantages of USB for those with a nasty sound card.

**Andrew Calvin**

## SPECIFICATIONS

- Connectivity: USB or analogue
- Acoustic system: open
- Impedance: 24 Ohms
- Headset: 40 - 20,000 Hz
- Microphone: 100 - 10,000 Hz
- Cord: 3 m
- Sensitivity: 106 dB/mW
- Power: 100 mW
- O/S: Windows XP, ME, 2000, 98 SEprotection.

## PCPP Score

Quality lightweight headphones and microphone, with an interesting USB twist.

**80**





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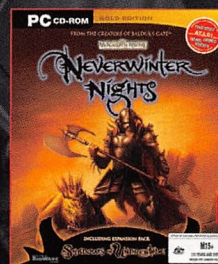
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# MSI Mega Stick 1

• Price: \$220 • Distributor: [www.msicomputer.com.au](http://www.msicomputer.com.au) • URL: [www.msicomputer.com.au](http://www.msicomputer.com.au)

**H**e who dies with the most toys wins, and this toy is a must-have for winners. This tidy little piece is a 5 in 1 digital storage and radio device although the "Language Learner" angle is a drawing a long bow for credibility; let's call it a "dictaphone". The MSI Mega Stick 1 is a 128MB flash storage device looking altogether like a removable disk in Windows Explorer. Plugging it into several WinXP computers induced a lockup on an nForce2 system but a reboot fixed this, with no subsequent problems.

There's an FM Radio and recorder; a digital recorder that will record anything you happen to point it at; and it will play MP3 and WMA format music. How big is 128 Megabytes? It's actually 122.07 'real' Megabytes but the Mega Stick 1 is big enough for a large music album converted to MP3 at 192Kb/s. It will fit two smaller albums at slightly lower bit rates, but, if you're like most

of the MP3 community you'd probably get 50-60 songs on there at whatever low, substandard community bit rate is available. Alternatively, you can carry around your latest saved games or any other de rigueur data you like. It comes with a driver disc for pre-XP Windows versions, a USB cable, one AAA battery that's good for about 10 hours of music and a chic neck strap-cum-headphone setup. It looks very, very groovy strung around your neck as the admiring glances at Woolworths late one night confirmed for me.

## SPECIFICATIONS

- 128MB USB flash memory
- 3.5mm stereo out
- 3.5mm mono mic-in
- Output: 60mW RMS (30mW / channel)
- Frequency: 20 to 20KHz
- SNR >90dB
- 96x25 pixel LCD module
- AAA alkaline battery power
- Ten FM station memory
- Updatable firmware.

## PCPP Score

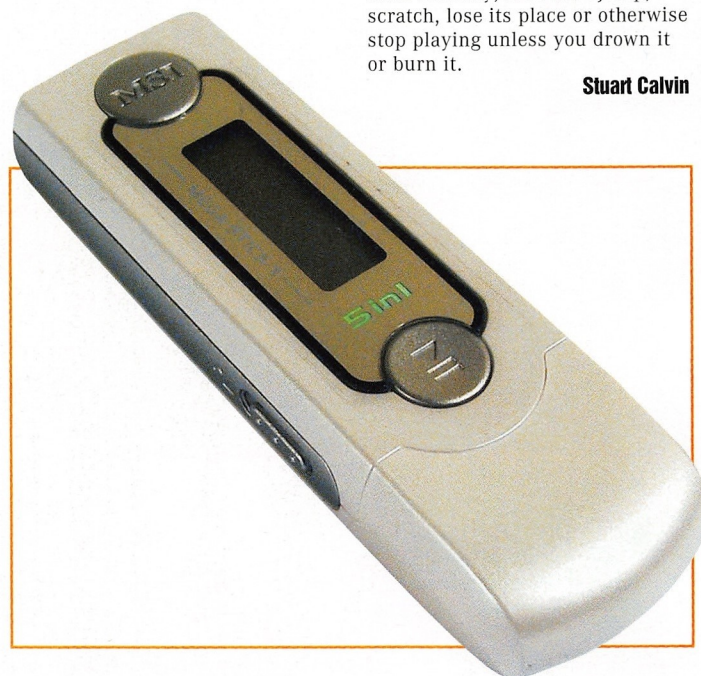
A good price, light, compact and simple to use. Can't wait for the 256MB version.

# 88

The local street kids, who are the true barometers of modern IT fashion, said that the Mega Stick 1 was "totally mad" - which I know to be 'outrageously good'. The headphones are sonically adequate and reasonably

comfortable with little leakage but you'll still get the occasional gritty looks on the bus listening to Big Bruvaz Nu Flow. You can hike, ride a bike, ski, jog, walk, run and go sky diving listening to the MSI Mega Stick 1 because, since it's flash memory, it doesn't jump, scratch, lose its place or otherwise stop playing unless you drown it or burn it.

Stuart Calvin



# Sony VPL-HS3

• Price: \$3,999 • Distributor: Sony [www.sony.com.au](http://www.sony.com.au) • URL: Sony [www.sony.com.au](http://www.sony.com.au)

**P**rojectors are the way of the future. There is simply no way that traditional screen devices, including plasma and LCD screens, can offer such a huge viewing size without costing more than your average Sydney shoebox, oops, apartment. Sony's latest offering, targeted at home theatre buffons, is the HS3, and as per Sony's usual standards, has several features that we love, mixed in with several that we don't.

At a touch under four grand, we expected this projector to have a resolution of 1024 x 768, but it wasn't to be. Instead it has a native resolution of only 858 x 484, which is the biggest flaw of the unit. You can now purchase a decent 800 x 600 projector for half the cost, and if you're paying four big ones, you might as well go for a higher resolution projector capable of 1024 x 768.

Something that we couldn't complain about was the colour quality of this projector, displaying

all the colours of the Skittles rainbow with a vibrance that even the creator of Technicolour would be proud of. Many projectors have issues with the colour black, but the HS3's Cinema Black Pro feature works well, as blacks were very dark without compromising the brightness of the surrounding areas.

You'll usually have to place a projector in the dead centre of your screen area to get a nice, straight image, but the implementation of horizontal keystoneing means you'll be able to place the HS3 off to the side of your room. It's a small touch, but one that makes this projector infinitely more convenient to set up than competing models. Despite Sony's claims that the fan within the HS3 is one of the quietest available,

at a mere 28dB, we found it to be quite noisy, especially noticeable during relatively quiet scenes within games.

The lack of a 15-pin D-sub connector was the final nail in the coffin for this projector. Sure, you can buy an adaptor to allow you to hook up your PC's D-sub output and thus assist Sony's CEO purchase his 17th beach house with the proceeds, but this feature really should have been built into the projector.

While the colour quality is exceptional, the low resolution and noisy fan make it very hard to recommend this projector. In fact, we'd go so far as to say that you're better off buying one of the new breed of 800 x 600 budget projectors for around half the cost, and spending the other two grand on a nice speaker setup or computer upgrade.

Bennett Ring

## SPECIFICATIONS

- 150 W UHP lamp
- Resolution: Video: 480 TV lines
- RGB: 858 x 484 pixels
- Expected Lamp Life: 2000-3000 hrs

## PCPP Score

For the low resolution on offer, this projector is simply too expensive. Save your money and look elsewhere.

# 70



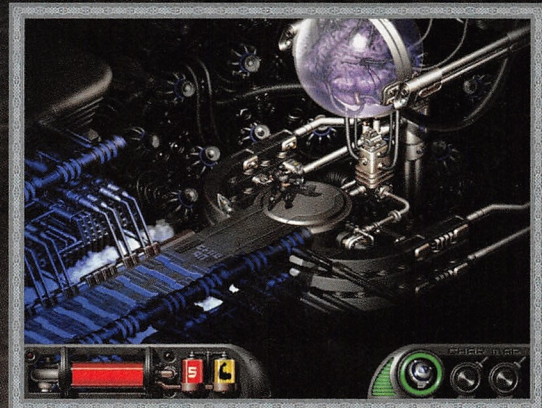


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Harbinger is a single-player action/RPG game set in a unique & detailed science fiction universe. Developed in the USA, Harbinger boasts an advanced graphics engine and a unique sci-fi setting and scenario, making it the only sci-fi game available on the best-selling action/RPG market on PC (Diablo like).



#### Stratosgroup.com - 4.5 out of 5

"...I award it the Stratospheric Award for being the first title in a long time to make me forget what time it was and just keep playing well past when I should have gone to sleep."

#### JustRPG.com - B+ (86%)

"Harbinger is a fun RPG to play if you give it the chance to show you what it can do!"

#### SciFi Mag - B

"Just when you think you can handle anything the bad guys throw at you, the bad guys will throw so much at you that you'll break a serious sweat killing them all, and it's these moments of sweat that make the game worth while."



# Adaptec SATA RAID 1210SA

• Price: \$129 • Distributor: LAN1 [www.lan1.com](http://www.lan1.com) • URL: Adaptec [www.adaptec.com](http://www.adaptec.com)

**A**imed at low-end servers or performance workstations such as gaming and video/music editing machines, this card supports two drives, and has onboard RAID 0 and 1 as well as JBOD ("Just a Bundle Of Disks" – a disk array without a dedicated controller). The drivers are compatible with Windows 2000 and XP, as well as RedHat and SuSE. The driver CD also contains Adaptec management software which you can use to configure the device within the OS. It can also be used to create a bootable floppy with the requisite drivers for Windows installations, and the CD can boot into a stripped-down version of Linux, allowing pre-OS configuration of the card.

The card supports the 32-bit wide PCI bus specification which has data throughput up to 264 MB/sec (66 MHz). This equates to data transfer at full SATA speeds (150 MB/sec), rather than at 132 MB/sec (33 MHz), which is the

limit of standard 32-bit PCI.

We tested the card on Windows XP Pro with two Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 120GB SATA drives, kindly donated by Achieva ([www.achieva.com.au](http://www.achieva.com.au)). The device detection and driver installation went through flawlessly, and the drives were picked up and ran happily together. Creating a striped RAID array was easily handled via Windows' Disk Management console.

The choice between a striped or mirrored setup really depends on personal preference. The major benefit of SATA in either case is that the data transfer between the two connected drives is at full SATA throughput, so the extra disk writes RAID generates

have little to no impact on overall system performance.

The only downside to this product is that once the card and two drives are installed, the power drain on the machine is considerable, especially if there are any other devices installed. The ongoing power drain is not too bad, but all devices attempt to initialise and spin up on startup – like the initial petrol drain on a car when the engine first turns over! To

accommodate this a minimum 400W power supply should be used – this is usually the case for hardcore gamers anyway, but it is a point worth noting.

**James Bannan**

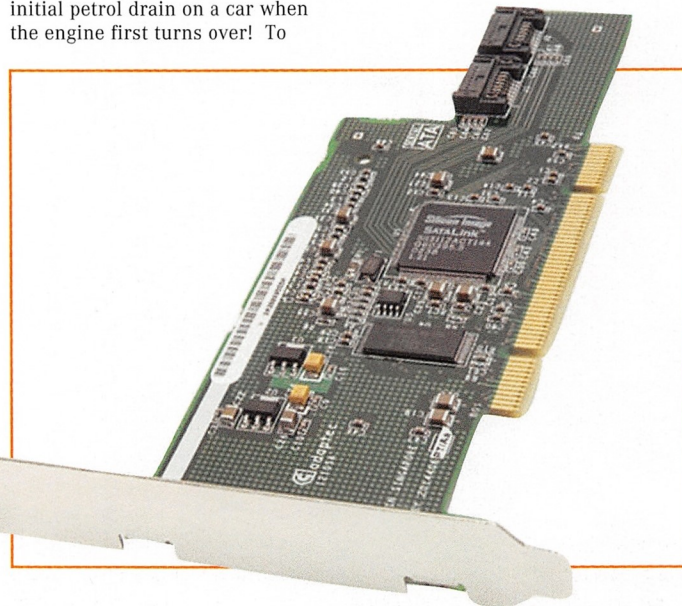
## SPECIFICATIONS

- Supports two SATA hard drives, with RAID 0 and 1, as well as JBOD
- Supports 32-bit 66 MHz PCI bus, and drives over 137GB

## PCPP Score

Easy to install, comes with a full suite of management software, and stable drivers. Also very affordable.

**85**



# Minitar Giga Switch Combo

• Price: 239 • Distributor: PC Range [www.pcrange.biz](http://www.pcrange.biz) • URL: Minitar [www.minitar.com](http://www.minitar.com)

**T**he review bundle included the 5-port MNGSSW-5 switch and two Minitar 10/100/1000 PCI Gigabit Ethernet adaptors (the MNPIC1000R). How else could I have thrown Gigabytes of data from box to box and still have a smile on my face? There was a time when 10Mb/s and 100Mb/s home networking was a pipe dream – think back to the mid-nineties when 2x burners were over a thousand bucks – it was like that. Ethernet 100 is now bog-standard on most motherboards these days and no-one quibbles over a few extra bucks for built-in network connectivity. Fly forward to PCPP #95 and Gigabit connectivity is dirt cheap.

Megabits and Megabytes differ by a factor of eight meaning that at the speed of light in a vacuum on a rainy Wednesday you'll get 12.5 Megabytes per second from Ethernet 100; reckon on 40% efficiency and you end up with 5MB/s; good enough for gaming but not good enough for \*ahem\*

backups and other critical activity. Pony up for a Gigabit Minitar bundle though and you can multiply that by something between five and ten. Using Ethernet 100 it takes 14-16 minutes to transfer 4.37GB of data – slower if it's just one file and faster if it's multiple files. I hand-timed a 4.37GB ISO file copy and it took a little over two minutes delivering 35-36MB/s across the

wire. Just let me say w00t a few times and wipe the sweat off my brow. I'm starting to think that Bennett only sends me the good stuff, because honestly I can't fault this gear. Sure, I know about managed networks and ATMs but this is dead set cool gear for home and small offices. Pimpled youths and harassed parents alike can benefit from this small investment. I set up two rigs and the Minitar on one side of a 10/100 switch and left three rigs on the 10/100 side. This is

potential disaster for really stupid switches, flinging quick '1000' data that has to be managed over another '100' switch. What can I say? The two Minitar equipped rigs communicated with gay abandon over the entire network with nary a problem.

**Stuart Calvin**

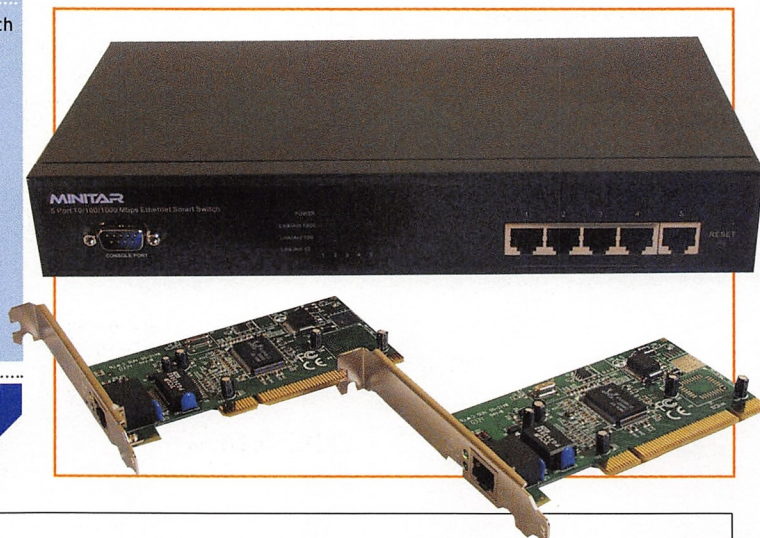
## SPECIFICATIONS

- 5-port 10/100/1000 Ethernet with 1000Mb/s full-duplex mode
- Store and Forward Modes automatic source learning and aging
- 8KB MAC address storage
- 2Mbit packet buffer
- Auto MDI/MDI-X on each port
- Console port for configuration
- Support up to 1536 byte packet
- Broadcast Storm Control
- CRC filtering; reset switch
- Diagnostic LEDs
- Cat5e cable included

## PCPP Score

For the price everyone should have this kit by law. Includes features for advanced users.

**95**

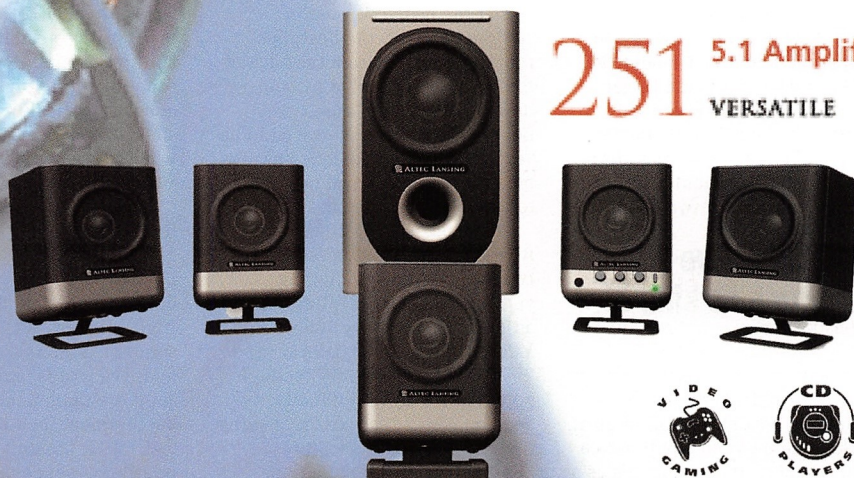






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ACT	Cougar Computers	(02) 6242 2703
W.A	Zeus	(08) 9382 2866
NSW	Oxygen	(02) 9649 4477



# Abit DigiDice

• Price: \$493 • Distributor: Altech [www.altech.com.au](http://www.altech.com.au) • URL: ABIT [www.abit-usa.com](http://www.abit-usa.com)

As most keen PCPP'ers are aware, the Abit brand name has, ever since the days of the BX chipset, rung synonymous with the concept of the hardware enthusiast. As far as motherboards are concerned, if overclocking/tweaking is a priority and price isn't a significant factor, most users don't look too far past Abit's extensive range. Thus, with the recent trend for SFF PCs to move away from their traditional home theatre origins and into the realms of the hardcore gamer (particularly with the inclusion of AGP slots), it's unsurprising that Abit has decided to extend its product line in an effort to grab even more market share. Having

it's also fairly compact. That said, it's important to note that, although not as deep, the DigiDice is slightly taller and wider than the Shuttle SB65G2. While this is certainly worth taking into consideration, the added size has also allowed Abit to cram many more features into the unit, such as two 5.25" drive bays, an LCD (which has a sexy blue backlight and can display information such as CPU speed, fan speeds, volume, temperatures and system time, etc) and a 6-in-1 media card reader. Additionally, the larger size also makes installation of components significantly easier, while at the same time enabling Abit to include convenient front ports, consisting of two USB 2.0

also located here - a god-send for the hardcore overclocker that won't stop until every last megahertz is drained from their poor CPU.

As seen on the Shuttle SB65G2, the DigiDice uses a heatpipe cooling solution, as well as an additional three case fans (one of which is external), ensuring that your components are kept nice and cool at all times. Also of note is that the heatsink used in conjunction with the heatpipe protrudes slightly from the back of the case, and is cooled by cold air brought in through the external fan duct. This system proved to be very effective, as the heatsink was never more than warm to the touch, even under load.

As expected, the DigiDice's BIOS features a plethora of tweaking options, including various DRAM/FSB ratios, an adjustable FSB up to 300MHz, and VCore (up to 1.85V)/DRAM (up to 2.8V)/AGP (up to 1.85V) voltage adjustments as well. Finally, as seen on Abit's regular ATX boards, the DigiDice's BIOS features "Game Accelerator" function, which gives users a nice performance increase through the enabling of memory tweaks.

Although we did have a few minor complaints in terms of functionality, as far as overclockability, cooling and motherboard layout goes, the DigiDice beats the SB65G2 hands down. As with the SB65G2, we tested the DigiDice with a Radeon 9800 Pro, 1GB DDR400 and a 2.4C Pentium 4 CPU - a test bench that the 200W PSU had no trouble

powering. Upon booting up the unit our first port of call was the BIOS, where we proceeded to tweak the unit all the way up to an FSB of 263MHz, resulting in a CPU speed of 3156MHz! This is around 100MHz higher than we were able to reach with our SB65G2 - a testament to the DigiDice's superior cooling abilities. As far as performance is concerned, the DigiDice performed almost identical to the SB65G2 at stock speeds, and slightly higher when it was overclocked - nothing surprising here, folks.

Overall, it looks as though we finally have a serious contender to Shuttle's throne as king of the barebones PC realm. Although we did have a few minor niggles, the DigiDice's awesome cooling solution, overclockability, motherboard layout and feature set more than make up for this. Furthermore, at a price of \$AUD493, the unit is also relatively inexpensive (the Shuttle SB65G2 retails for \$AUD490). The bottom line is, if you were to purchase a barebones PC tomorrow, you'll be hard pressed to find a product more appealing than ABIT's DigiDice.

Asher Moses

said that, it will certainly take more than just reputation for the Abit DigiDice to succeed in such a crowded SFF market (it seems that every Taiwanese manufacturer and his dog is producing them lately) - with particular emphasis on Shuttle's SB65G2 from last issue which we dubbed as "the best SFF unit we've seen yet". Suffice to say; although we've come into this review with high expectations, the thought of a truly enthusiast-built mini-pc certainly got our panties in a twist. The verdict? Read on!

The DigiDice features a motherboard based around the i865G chipset, with two DDR400 slots supporting up to 2GB of memory, 800MHz/533MHz FSB P4 support, dual PATA and SATA ports, Realtek AC97 5.1-channel audio, Realtek 8101L 10/100 LAN, a 200W PSU and onboard Intel Extreme Graphics 2 (which can be disabled in the BIOS for those with AGP cards). It also includes an AGP8X port, as well as a PCI port, making the DigiDice almost identical to the Shuttle SB65G2 as far as specifications are concerned.

Design-wise, it's clear that Abit has made a concerted effort to differentiate the DigiDice from the copious Shuttle XPC clones that have flooded the market as of late. However, don't be fooled by its appearance, as although it looks very much like a home theatre PC, it's actually been designed to function much like a mainstream desktop/gaming machine. Firstly, the chassis is made out of front aluminium, save for the front bezel which has been manufactured out of a sturdy plastic. This makes it fairly light - ideal for LAN parties - and with dimensions of 307mm(W)x255mm(D)x215mm(H)

ports, a FireWire port, a headphone port and a Mic In port.

The volume knob you'll notice in the attached image doubles as a power button, and adjusting the knob during bootup allows you to painlessly increase your CPU speed by up to 25%. The 25% limit imposed is purely for safety purposes, while more intense overclocking can be performed in the BIOS. Above the volume knob you'll notice four hotkeys, which can be programmed in Windows to run your favourite applications or frequently used functions. Additionally, the blue button-looking device next to the hotkeys is actually an Infra-Red receiver for the included remote, which has a decent range and comprehensive functionality. Overall, the external design of the unit is attractive and well thought-out, however, we were slightly disappointed at the lack of a reset button, HDD activity LED, rear SPDIF input and rear FireWire port.

Moving inside, the unit is held together with thumbscrews, meaning that installation of components is a simple, screwdriver-less affair. As mentioned above, there's plenty of room to move inside the unit, and coupled with a tidy array of cables, airflow isn't an issue here. Furthermore, the unit was tested using multiple video cards, and we're please to report that there is plenty of room for any beast of a card you may own. Finally, we were very impressed with the motherboard layout adopted by ABIT, which has been designed so that the Parallel and Serial ATA ports are located in the front left-hand corner of the unit, again facilitating painless installation. Additionally, the CMOS jumper is



## Overall, it looks as though we finally have a serious contender to Shuttle's throne as king of the barebones PC realm

### SPECIFICATIONS

- i865PE-Based
- Dual-Channel DDR400
- AGP8X
- 1x PCI
- 800MHz FSB
- Realtek 10/100 LAN
- Realtek 5.1 Audio

### PCPP Score

If you're an enthusiast and are in the market for a barebones PC, Abit's DigiDice almost has it all.

# 95







# Microsoft Wireless Optical Desktop Executive Edition

• Price: \$249.95 • Distributor: Microsoft [www.microsoft.com.au](http://www.microsoft.com.au) • URL: Microsoft [www.microsoft.com.au](http://www.microsoft.com.au)

I've got to get out more. As I sit here lovingly stroking this fake leather wrist pad, I realise it's time to start hanging out with fellow humans more than computers. And yet, even if I did actually have a social life, I'd still be thinking about Microsoft's latest highend keyboard/mouse combo in the back of my mind, while my mates blather on about their latest conquests.

The most obvious feature about this attractive combo is its luxurious lashings of faux leather. The keyboard wrist rest is 100% fake dead cow flesh, while a large portion of the mouse is also covered. Not only does it make this combo look like the Ferrari of the input world, it's also very comfortable. However, we're not sure how it's going to shape up after several months of use - most likely it'll end up covered in the grime that oozes from gamer's hands during a heavy bout of CounterStrike or Q3A.

The other standout feature are the scroll wheels found on both the keyboard and mouse. Not only do they rotate vertically, you can now tilt them sideways, which is handy for scrolling horizontally through windows that are too wide for your piddly 15" monitor. Unfortunately the scrolling wheel has a smooth motion, which can make it a little tricky to select weaponry within games.

The keyboard is covered with a hundred and one different shortcut keys, including 5 'favourites' shortcuts, full media controls, and separate buttons for basically any other Windows based application that you're likely to use regularly. Configuring these keys to fire up your favourite applications is very simple thanks to the intuitive mapping software. The keys have a

smooth, chunky feel to them, rather than the clickety clack sensation seen in older, cheaper keyboards. The update rate between the wireless mouse and base station seems up to scratch as well, as there wasn't any of the lag we've seen from other wireless mice.

So it all sounds good, right? Unfortunately there's one major problem - batteries. You'll need a total of 5 AA batteries to get this combo working; it would have been preferable if Microsoft had of

built rechargeable batteries into both the keyboard and mouse. Having said that, Microsoft claim that you probably won't need to change the batteries more than once every six months.

Is you're looking for a budget priced keyboard and mouse, look elsewhere, as this pack is a tad expensive. Scratch that, it's bloody expensive. But you didn't expect such a feature packed, sexy combo to be cheap, did you?

**Bennett Ring**

## SPECIFICATIONS

- Side scrolling scroll wheels
- USB and P/S2 connections
- 39 shortcut keys

## PCPP Score

It's gorgeous, easy to use and has plenty of sensible shortcut keys, but lacks rechargeable batteries, and it's certainly not cheap.

**82**



# Gigabyte GO-M1600A Multimedia DVD-ROM

• Price: \$219 • Distributor: Synnex [www.synnex.com.au](http://www.synnex.com.au) • URL: Gigabyte [www.gigabyte.com.tw](http://www.gigabyte.com.tw)

Beige, black or gaudy blue plastic stripes: what else can a manufacturer do to differentiate a boring DVD-ROM drive in a competitive market? Gigabyte's solution is to mod their office-beige D1600A DVD-ROM with a multimedia faceplate and multifunctional innards. There's an add-in card requiring a free slot at the rear of the PC - not necessarily a PCI Slot itself. The add-in card performs several functions including the provision of a separate power source for the drive when the PC is turned off. Yep. This DVD-ROM allows gamers to enjoy music without the need for the computer to be powered on. In essence, with your PC on or off, you can sit down and fire up a CD of music or listen to FM Radio. The M1600A can also store your favourite FM Radio stations. All very handy when the LaN Blaster needs to be off during quiet contemplation of the last frag fest. There's a wireless

remote as well as standard faceplate controls. The remote is small and tidy, and fits easily into a pocket. The external face of the add-in card backplane has an FM aerial socket and two 3.5mm speaker sockets. Internally the add-in card features four connectors including power from the card to the DVD drive, some audio sockets and a mini-IDE cable. That's a few more cables inside your rig and the internal mini-IDE may not be long enough for some of the big boxes like Chieftan and Macase towers. The faceplate is not as rickety as it

looks and locks back onto the drive with a snug fit. The faceplate control panel is an eye-catching Vacuum Fluorescent Display type with easy to read and intuitive feedback displays. The GO-M1600A supports 16x DVD-ROM and 48x CD-ROM read speeds. Digital Audio extraction is also fast and accurate from this drive. All the usual formats are supported including DVD+RW,

DVD Single and Dual layer, DVD-R (Disc at once and multi border), DVD-RW v-2.0, PHOTO CD (Single and multiple session), Super Video CDs and CD-Extra. Even if your PC won't boot, or even if it locks up, you'll still sound good!

**Stuart Calvin**

## SPECIFICATIONS

- Operating Systems supported: Win9x/Me/NT/2000/XP, OS/2 warp, Novell, SCO Unix and Linux.
- Other formats supported: CD-R, CD-RW, CD-ROM Mode 1, CD-ROM XA Mode 2 (form1/form2) and CD-DA
- S/P-DIF Output for digital support

## PCPP Score

A cool and funky idea that'll look good anywhere, anytime. A sure talking point at a LaN Fest.

**80**





## Bennett Ring Powertools

While it would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if we could review hardware based on the shininess of the packaging it arrives in, we're pretty sure our beloved readers are a little more interested in how the hardware actually performs. Which is why we have the PC PowerPlay PowerTools - batteries not included.

If you're anything like us, you probably don't give a rat's arse if Word will open three seconds faster on the new

Pentium 64, or if you can compress a zip file more speedily using DDR6-8000 memory. Nope, this is PowerPlay, so it's all about how well your games will perform.

Our PowerTools are broken into two categories, videocard tests and CPU/motherboard/memory tests, and you'll notice that most of these are based on real world game engines. We spoke to Intel, AMD, NVIDIA and ATI about which games to use to benchmark our hardware, and

after tossing out their biased recommendations settled on the following applications for the majority of our tests. Of course, every now and then a unique piece of hardware will arrive that can't be tested properly using these applications, and in these circumstances we'll use the most appropriate benchmarking software.

We also use test benches (a fancy way of saying a PC outside of a case, waiting to electrocute unsuspecting

hardware newbs), standardised hardware platforms that ensure our benchmark results can be compared to each other month after month. As better benchmarks are released, we'll strive to include these in the PowerTools section, and with the imminent release of a few big name DX9 titles, you'll see a couple of changes over the coming months. But until then, here are the benchmarks that we'll be using to put new hardware through its paces.

### CPU Tests

#### 3D Mark03 CPU test

Nobody can deny that this CPU test is a nice way to give processors a thorough workout. And hey, it's easy to use and free - 'nuff said.

#### Jedi Knight 2

We couldn't ignore a benchmark that includes lightsabres. We run this test at low resolution (640x480), with texture details lowered, and geometry details maxed out.

#### [H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test 2.1

We run the CPU test of this benchmark at low resolution, and it's one of the finest indicators of CPU performance available.

#### Comanche 4

It sucked as a game, but as a CPU/motherboard/memory benchmark this is a beauty. We run at 640x480 resolution to make sure it's the CPU that's carrying the load.

### Videocard tests

#### Quake 3 Arena v1.32

This OpenGL golden oldie is the

most prolific game benchmark around. We run this test at 1024x768, 1280x1024 and 1600x1200, with all graphics settings at their highest.

#### 3DMark2001 SE v330

An excellent DirectX 8.1 benchmark, we're still waiting for games to look this bloody good. Unlike its newer sibling, 2001SE doesn't have a reputation for being incredibly biased. We run this at the same resolutions as the Q3A test.

#### Serious Sam: Jaguar Demo

Throw dozens of detailed enemies into a massive, gorgeous level and you've got a benchmark that is guaranteed to make your videocard howl in pain. Once again, we test at the same resolutions as the Q3A test.

#### [H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test

Crank up the resolution and set the benchmark to High Quality mode, and you've got a test that will bring both ATI and NVIDIA products to their knees. This is also the test that we use for anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing tests, at a resolution of 1280 x 1024.

### TEST BENCHES

#### Intel Test Bench (x2) Intel Pentium 4 2.6C

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO  
[www.akatech.com.au](http://www.akatech.com.au)

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL  
DDR400

[www.altech.com.au](http://www.altech.com.au)

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB  
ATA100 Hard Drive  
[www.seagate.com](http://www.seagate.com)

ABIT IS7 865PE motherboard  
[www.altech.com.au](http://www.altech.com.au)

TOPOWER 470W PSU  
[www.auspcmarket.com.au](http://www.auspcmarket.com.au)

Mitsubishi Diamond View  
2115e 21" monitor  
[www.mitsubishi.com.au](http://www.mitsubishi.com.au)

Microsoft multimedia keyboard  
and optical mouse  
[www.microsoft.com.au](http://www.microsoft.com.au)

Windows XP Professional  
[www.microsoft.com.au](http://www.microsoft.com.au)

#### Image Quality testing:

We also use a Sony G520 21" CRT monitor for the image quality testing of video cards.

#### AMD Test Bench (x1) AMD Athlon XP 2600+

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO  
[www.akatech.com.au](http://www.akatech.com.au)

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL  
DDR400

[www.altech.com.au](http://www.altech.com.au)

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB  
ATA100 Hard Drive  
[www.seagate.com](http://www.seagate.com)

ABIT NF7-S  
[www.altech.com.au](http://www.altech.com.au)

TOPOWER 470W PSU  
[www.auspcmarket.com.au](http://www.auspcmarket.com.au)

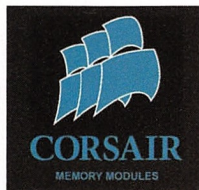
Mitsubishi Mitsubishi Diamond  
View 2115e 21" monitor  
[www.mitsubishi.com](http://www.mitsubishi.com)

Microsoft multimedia keyboard  
and optical mouse  
[www.microsoft.com.au](http://www.microsoft.com.au)

Windows XP Professional  
[www.microsoft.com.au](http://www.microsoft.com.au)



[www.akatech.com.au](http://www.akatech.com.au)



[www.corsairmicro.com](http://www.corsairmicro.com)



[www.auspcmarket.com.au](http://www.auspcmarket.com.au)



[www.intel.com](http://www.intel.com)



[www.abit.com.tw](http://www.abit.com.tw)



[www.amd.com](http://www.amd.com)



[www.seagate.com](http://www.seagate.com)



[www.hightech.com.hk](http://www.hightech.com.hk)



[www.altech.com.au](http://www.altech.com.au)



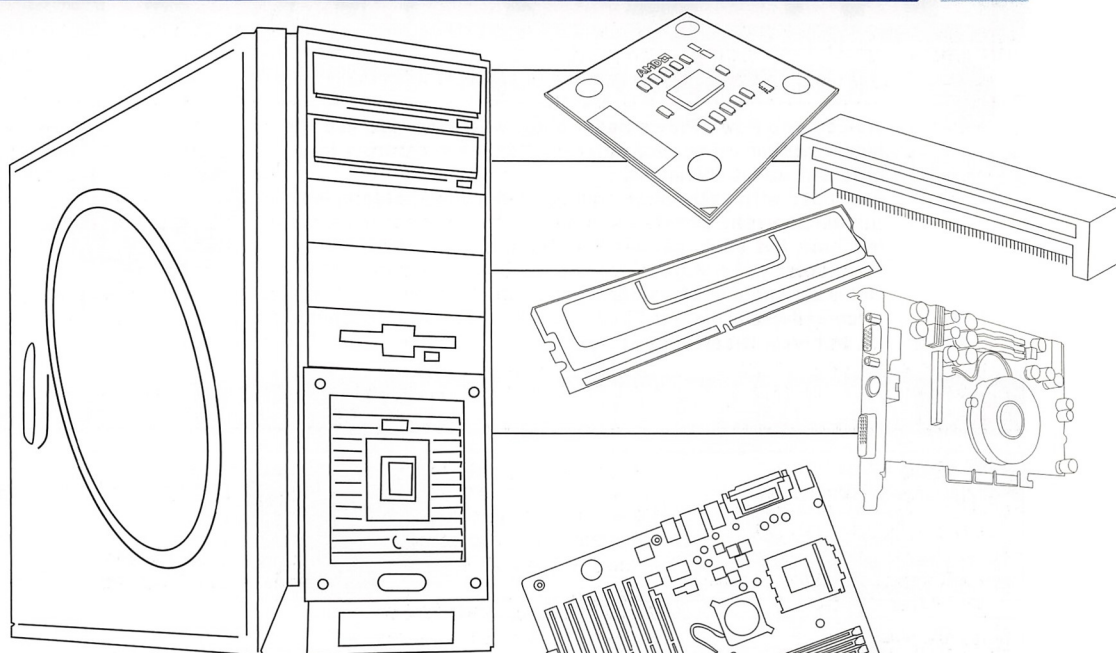
[www.sony.com.au](http://www.sony.com.au)



[www.mitsubishi-electric.com.au](http://www.mitsubishi-electric.com.au)



**C**hip Chat makes your games go around. If an American always seems to know that they're heading East on West Street then it's only fair that us Aussies and Kiwis know the difference between a Northbridge and a Southbridge. The most critical component of a motherboard is the "chipset". There are actually two system chipsets with design features that enable various technologies. Motherboard manufacturers may also add-in other chipsets that enable networking, sound, enhanced I/O for peripherals (VIA's VT1211 LPC Super I/O for serial and parallel port connectivity). Perhaps the most renowned chipset was Intel's 440BX AGPset (82443BX) chipset which saw the dawn of synchronous 100MHz system and SDRAM memory buses and an ATA/66 HDD interface in UDMA Mode 2 (hey, it was big back then!).



**Northbridge:** The Northbridge chipset provides the data communication between the CPU, RAM and AGP video adaptor. This chipset determines the Front Side Bus support, RAM configuration and AGP bandwidth. It's here that all of the very sexy high speed, high intensity data crunching occurs.

**Southbridge:** Personally, I think the Southbridge chipset is far more interesting because it provides features like USB2.0, Ethernet and Gigabit LAN connectivity, multi-channel audio, RAID, ATA133 and Serial ATA as well as Serial and Parallel Port connectivity. Not to forget the mouse, keyboard and PCI Bus!

**MCH:** The Memory Controller Hub on the Northbridge.

**ICH:** The In/Out Controller Hub on the Southbridge.

**VIA K8:** The chipset series for 64-bit AMD CPUs (K8T800)

**VIA P4:** The chipset series for Socket-478 Pentium 4 and Celerons (PT800).

**VIA K7:** The chipset series for Athlons and Durons (KT600 and KT400A).

**VIA C Series:** The chipset series for box-rockets, P-IIIs and Socket 370 Celerons (CLE266).

**VIA VT8237 and VT8235:** The two VIA Southbridge chipset solutions. The 8237 features native Serial ATA and RAID (a technology that harnesses the power of multiple hard drives working together).

**Intel i875 and i865:** The Canterwood and Springdale chipsets from Intel. Native Serial ATA, native RAID and a dedicated Gigabit network bus. The support of memory Error Correcting and 'Turbo Mode' are the only two major differences between the 865 and 875 chipset families. They only provide support for Intel CPUs. The i875 is a very cool chipset for gamers.

**Intel 82801EB (ICH5) and 82801ER (ICH5R):** The I/O Southbridge chipsets. The "R" signifies RAID functionality. Intel PAT: Many of the Northbridge features are common across the manufacturer's offerings. Recently though, they have begun to differentiate their products with other integrated technology. PAT or Performance Acceleration Technology, they say, delivers additional system-level performance by optimising memory access between CPU and system memory on the 800MHz FSB and Dual Channel DDR 400 configurations. Also known as Turbo Mode.

**VIA FastStream64 Memory Controller Technology:** VIA uses an expanded array of prefetch buffers to reduce latency in the memory controller.

**Intel Hyper-Threading:** A BIOS enabled routine to prioritise and optimise the work done by the CPU.

**Intel CSA:** Communications Streaming Architecture. A dedicated subsystem on the 875 and 865 Northbridge chipsets intended for a high-speed, 266MB/sec bandwidth, Gigabit network connection. Given a

special bus for network needs, the network requests get processed much faster and the CPU workload drops significantly.

**VIA V-MAP:** The Modular Architecture Platform. Designed to be fully pin-to-pin compatible with current and future VIA Southbridges, and to enable VIA Northbridge designs across all the major Pentium 4, AMD and VIA CPUs.

**VIA V-Link:** A 533MB/s high bandwidth North/Southbridge interconnect.

**V-RAID:** VIA's implementation of RAID 0, RAID 1, and RAID 0+1, Serial ATA and ATA133 standards for the KT600 chipset.

**266/333/400MHz:** Supported memory and Front Side Bus speeds for the AMD KT600 chipset. The KT400A does not support a 400MHz FSB.

**400/533/800MHz:** Supported Front Side Bus speeds for Intel CPUs. Unlike the 865, the 875 does not support 400MHz.

**Dual-Channel Memory:** As the name implies, dual memory controllers can effectively increase the memory bandwidth and reduce latency. Double Data Rate SDRAM can be paired for 400/333/266 memory speeds.

**nForce:** NVIDIA's chipset range. The NVIDIA nForce2 Ultra 400 incorporates dual 400MHz DDR controllers, a 128-bit architecture, and 400MHz front side bus (FSB)

support. The NVIDIA nForce2 400 relies on a single 64-bit memory channel to deliver 400MHz FSB and 400MHz DDR performance. The nForce 2 chipset was the first to offer us Dual Channel Memory support on the AMD front.

**NVIDIA MCP-T:** The Media and Communications Processor - Turbo. Found on nForce motherboards providing support for sound and Ethernet.

**Silicon Image sil3112A:** An add-on motherboard controller for Serial ATA which is limited by the PCI Bus to 133MB/s. Native solutions built into the Southbridge chipset can exceed this limitation.

**Chipset Drivers:** The motherboard chipsets contain micro-code that execute when something needs to be done. They are controlled by software drivers or more specifically chipset driver sets. The most familiar software driver sets would be the VIA 4in1 driver set, now known as the Hyperion drivers and the Intel Chipset Software Installation Utility. Although Windows XP can load its 'native' drivers, a motherboard will not function as advertised without the drivers correctly and fully installed. Many hardware problems can be traced back to buggy or incorrectly installed chipset drivers. Different chipsets support different CPUs. There are similar offerings from SiS, AMD, ALi and some other lesser known manufacturers. Supporting your CPU is not just a simple matter of choosing a brand-name board but also knowing what the chipset is and what features it can offer.



# THE BEAST



## In association with Altech Computers

Welcome to PowerPlay's Beast page, where we give you the blueprints for three very different PCs, each catering to a different wallet thickness.

For those with extra phat, well padded money holders, look no further than the Beast. You'll be hard pressed to find a faster machine, but you'll pay through the nose for the privilege. Then there's the Mutant, for those who don't mind a bit of tinkering and overclocking. It offers the best balance between price and performance. Finally we have the Beastie. Cheap it may be, but slow it certainly is not.



## CPU, MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

### AMD Athlon FX-51 CPU

Goodbye Intel, hello AMD. The FX-51 is bloody expensive, but the fact that it's the fastest gaming processor around meant we had no choice but to fit out The Beast with this speed demon.

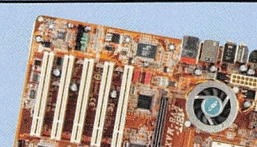
**\$1423** [www.amd.com](http://www.amd.com)



### Abit KV8-MAX3

A hellu board in a hellu package that includes everything from an extra USB back plate to black rounded IDE cables. And it's powered by VIA's KT800 chipset - Serial ATA RAID goodness!

**\$358** [www.abit.com.tw](http://www.abit.com.tw)



### 1GB Corsair TWINX-3200 ECC Registered

The FX-51 demands only the finest in registered memory, and a Gig of the stuff for a mere \$630 is quite simply a bargain. It's Corsair as well, so it must be pretty good, right?

**\$630** [www.corsairmemory.com](http://www.corsairmemory.com)



### Zalman 7000A-Cu

The Beast is so chunky, so wild and untameable that you need a real man's cooler stuck on the top of your mighty CPU. Zalman delivers, offering a chunk of metal that performs well and isn't too screamingly loud.

**\$82** [www.zalman.co.kr](http://www.zalman.co.kr)



### Antec TruePower 550W

With 550 watts of blistering power you can plug in as many crazy case fans, cooling systems and front-mounted LCD panels as you like and still enjoy smooth, reliable gaming.

**\$233** [www.antec-inc.com](http://www.antec-inc.com)



## VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

### GeCube RADEON 9800XT PRO 256MB

With more onboard memory than some people's whole PC, the latest in the RADEON family will get your FSAA performance up and keep it up.

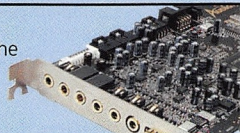
**\$890** [www.gigacube.com.tw](http://www.gigacube.com.tw)



### Creative Soundblaster Audigy 2 Platinum

The most powerful consumer-level soundcard on the market. Support for every sound format, including Dolby 6.1 surround.

**\$415** [australia.creative.com](http://australia.creative.com)



### Creative Inspire 6600 6.1

Let your soundcard handle all the decoding and plug these cheap but powerful speakers into the ports on the back. An extra rear channel beefs your gaming surround!

**\$264** [australia.creative.com](http://australia.creative.com)



## STORAGE AND OPTICAL

### Sony DRU510A DVD +/- R/RW

Almost but not quite cheap enough for mere mortals to own, this Sony drive will burn DVDs and CDs at 4X and 24X respectively - tasty!

**\$413** [www.sony.com.au](http://www.sony.com.au)



### Samsung 816BRPS 16x DVD-ROM

It's straight up and down, it's cheap, it's fast, it works well and you need it to copy - sorry, back up - DVDs using your nifty writer.

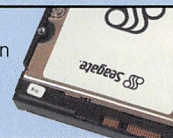
**\$63** [www.samsung.com.au](http://www.samsung.com.au)



### 2x Seagate 120GB Serial ATA in RAID 0

Thanks to the IC7-G's support for Serial ATA RAID, you can run your 120GB in super-fast RAID 0 mode for even quicker load times - and to be damn cool too, of course.

**\$518** [www.seagate.com](http://www.seagate.com)



## DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

### 21" Sony FD Trinitron G520

Until large LCD catches up with small LCD the Beast will stick with dependable, mature, established CRT. And the G520 is one of the best in the business.

**\$1960** [www.sony.com.au](http://www.sony.com.au)



### Antec PlusView 100AMG

It may not be the Rolls Royce of cases but it's roomy, has a built in side window and it has all of Antec's various quick access features. Take note, Lian-Li.

**\$171** [www.antec-inc.com](http://www.antec-inc.com)



### Logitech Elite Black

Smooth mechanism, funky styling and support for both PS/2 and USB make this keyboard the right choice. Real men use ergonomic keyboards though, don't forget.

**\$88** [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com)



### Logitech MX700 wireless mouse.

Normally we wouldn't recommend a wireless mouse for gaming, but the MX700 is an exception due to its high refresh rate.

**\$169** [www.logitech.com](http://www.logitech.com)



## BEAST VALUE:

## \$7677

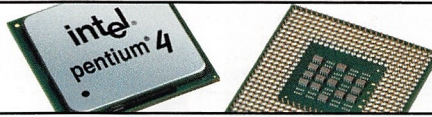


# THE MUTANT

Thanks to the popularity of overclocking and tweaking, we've included this machine to show you exactly what you can get away with for not much outlay. Tweaked to within an inch of its life, this is the machine we DO own, versus the Beast, which is the machine we'd like to be able to AFFORD to own.

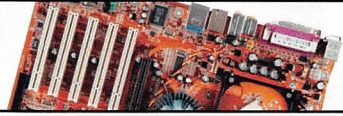
## Intel P4 2.6GHz "C" at 3.3GHz

Truly the most overclockable of all modern CPUs, the 2.6C can be run a staggering 800MHz over its stock speed. With the standard Intel HSF. Now that's value.  
\$380 [www.intel.com](http://www.intel.com)



## Abit A17

The latest 865PE based from Abit, the A17 has a very handy feature in that you can overclock your system directly from the Windows desktop. Which means you needn't delve into the confusing BIOS options ever again.  
\$231 [www.abit.com.tw](http://www.abit.com.tw)



## Logitech Elite Black keyboard and MX700 mouse

If it's good enough for the Beast, it's good enough for the Mutant. Sure, both of these components aren't exactly cheap, but you can't skimp on the interface between you and your box of love. And for a wireless mouse, the MX700 is a ripper.  
\$257 [www.logitech.com.au](http://www.logitech.com.au)



## Antec TrueControl 550W

What could be groovier than a PSU that comes with a 5.25" front plate with dials and knobs for controlling fan speed plastered all over it? Nothing, that's what.  
\$229 [www.antec-inc.com](http://www.antec-inc.com)



## Antec PlusView 1000AMG

What's good enough for the Beast is good enough for the Creature, especially where the price is right. And with this machine, you'll definitely make the most of the side window.  
\$171 [www.antec-inc.com](http://www.antec-inc.com)



## 512MB Corsair TWINX-3200LL

Ah the half-gig sweet spot, is there nothing finer? This RAM is beefy enough to support a bit of tweaking, so perhaps you can drag a little extra performance out of it?  
\$297 [www.corsairmemory.com](http://www.corsairmemory.com)



## GeCube RADEON 9800 PRO 128MB

Amusingly, the video card is the single most expensive component of the Creature. It's hard to believe that you can now get a RADEON 9800 PRO for a mere \$645, considering just how blazingly fast this video card is.  
\$645 [www.gigacube.com.tw](http://www.gigacube.com.tw)



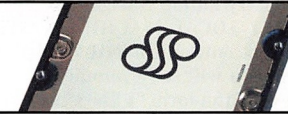
## Zalman VGA Heatpipe Cooler 80C-HP

Bolt this mighty thing to your video card, attach the included fan, and who knows what insane core speeds you can achieve?  
\$60 [www.zalman.co.kr](http://www.zalman.co.kr)



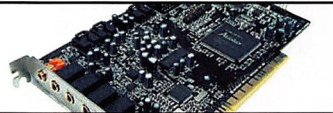
## 120GB Seagate IDE

The first upgrade HDD I ever bought was 6GB and cost \$447. So this is pretty damn cheap. Only standard IDE, but at this price we can't complain.  
\$174 [www.seagate.com](http://www.seagate.com)



## Creative SB Audigy

Lacks a few of the features found on the Audigy 2, but only the ones that don't really have much effect on gaming. There's a lot of soundcard here for not much cost.  
\$159 [australia.creative.com](http://australia.creative.com)



## Creative Inspire 6.1 6600

They're so cheap they're good enough for the Creature too. No decoder, no difficult optical inputs, just ordinary wires plugging in to a set of extraordinary speakers.  
\$264 [australia.creative.com](http://australia.creative.com)



## Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM

Same as the Beast, this drive is fast, dependable and has a slightly funkier facade than most of the beige monstrosities currently available.  
\$63 [www.samsung.com.au](http://www.samsung.com.au)



## Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW

Wow, these things sure got cheap didn't they? Burn CDs in hardly any time at all thanks to 52x writing. Backup all your digital LAN shots for posterity. Pose nude... no wait, don't.  
\$70 [www.samsung.com.au](http://www.samsung.com.au)



## 19" Samsung 995 Dynafiat

Cheaper than the video card but still a lot of sleek, flat monitor. Nineteen inches is pretty much the minimum for decent gaming, and we can't wait until a 16ms LCD this big costs this much.  
\$522 [www.samsung.com.au](http://www.samsung.com.au)



## 4x Antec USB Light Sticks

Pep up the Creature with a few light sticks. Stick 'em on the monitor, in the case, wherever you like. USB powered and respond to sound - clap on, clap off! Other cosmetic additions to the Creature are limited only by your imagination.  
\$132 [www.antec-inc.com](http://www.antec-inc.com)



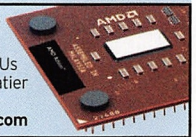
**MUTANT VALUE: \$3654**

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## AMD -Athon XP 2500+ Barton

The cheapest CPUs keep getting meatier and meatier  
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## Abit NF7

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## Antec Lanboy

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\$185 [www.antec-inc.com](http://www.antec-inc.com)



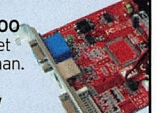
## 512MB Corsair PC-3200

A budget PC with half a gig of RAM. All praise the open market.  
\$199 [www.corsairmemory.com](http://www.corsairmemory.com)



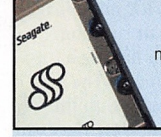
## GeCube RADEON 9800

Yes, a 9800 in a budget system. Holy shit batman.  
\$484 [www.gigacube.com.tw](http://www.gigacube.com.tw)



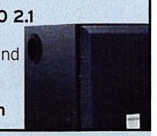
## 60GB Seagate IDE

Plenty of room for not much cash. Dependable and reliable.  
\$149 [www.seagate.com](http://www.seagate.com)



## Creative Inspire 2400 2.1

Plug 'em in to the nForce2's onboard sound and it's MP3-tastic!  
\$90 [australia.creative.com](http://australia.creative.com)



## Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM

Good enough for all the PCs on this page, swift and reliable.  
\$73 [www.samsung.com.au](http://www.samsung.com.au)



## Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW

Cheap, fast, reliable, what more could you want from a CD-RW?  
\$70 [www.samsung.com.au](http://www.samsung.com.au)



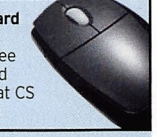
## 17" Samsung SyncMaster 753S

To think flat screen 17" monitors were once worth \$800. I love the future.  
\$235 [www.samsung.com.au](http://www.samsung.com.au)



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**beastie value: \$1862**

So, you want one of these three fine beasts? Luckily, all of these components are available at  
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02 9735 5655





# SETUP

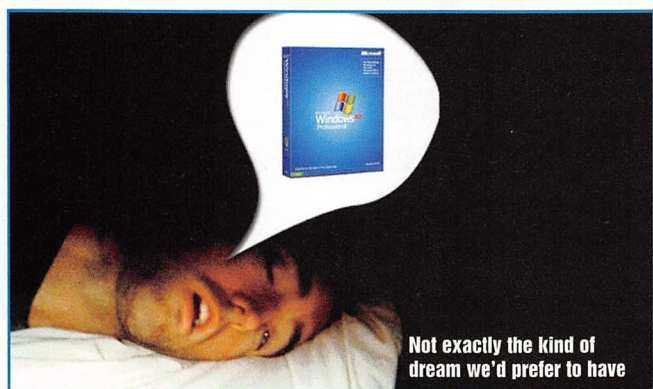


WRITE TO SETUP AT:

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PC Powerplay  
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## WINDOZE NIGHTMARES



**Q** I have a shiny new SoundBlaster Live! 5.1 Platinum with Live Drive IR to replace my GA-7VRX mainboard's on-board sound. I'm running WinXP Pro and am having a nightmare installing it. The hardware wizard picks up the card, but the Found New Hardware Wizard says "Cannot Install This Hardware - the data is invalid." I have downloaded the latest SP1a and the WinXP drivers from Creative and it is still not working. The Creative Diagnostic tool states Hardware Detection & MIDI Driver is PASS, but Wave, Mixer, DirectSound & DirectSound 3D Drivers are FAIL. Besides swapping PCI slots (which doesn't make a difference anyway) what else can I do???

Mr Shane

**A** I can think of two possible issues. Firstly, PCI slots for SoundBlasters DO MATTER. I've been through Audigy Hell and my card is now in the sixth slot; if I had 10 PCI slots, it'd be in the eleventh. Barebone your

system and install the Live! first, then any other PCI cards. Another fix may be the tip that Rob Halstead gave us in February. This "data is invalid" error can be due to a protection problem in the Windows registry and can occur with a variety of drivers. To fix this problem, go to Start/Run... and type <regedit> then press [Enter] to run the Registry Editor. Navigate to HKEY\_LOCAL\_MACHINE\SYSTEM\CurrentControlSet\ENUM\PCI and you will see a number of keys of the form "VEN\_xxxx", where xxxx are strings like "1102&DEV\_0004&SUBSYS\_00011103&REV\_04". Under each of these folders will be another folder with a long numerical name. Open each folder and look for the "DeviceDesc" which matches the hardware you are trying to install. Right Click on the "VEN\_xxxx" for that device and select "Permissions" and then tick "Allow" for "Full Control". Close Regedit and then continue with the installation of your device.

## MISSING HD SPACE

**Q** I recently upgraded to an AMD XP2600+, Asus A7N8X-X and a 80GB hard-drive. When I installed WinMe it says I only have 2GB on the hard-drive. So I formatted the drive and after it had been formatted it still said it only had 2GB of space.

Michael

**A** It is a problem between WinMe and the NVIDIA nForce2-400 chipset drivers. I'm betting that you haven't installed the motherboard chipset drivers,

in which case the native Microsoft IDE/ATA drivers are going nuts, or they haven't installed correctly. I'm surprised the damn thing can boot! Do yourself a favour and perform a clean, vanilla upgrade to WinXP. The latest drivers for Win9x/Me is Unified Driver v-2.41, 19 May 2003, which weight in at 11.8MB. There are two BIOS revisions which you may need to look at too: the latest BIOS, containing fixes for specific DDR400 memory modules is 1007 located in C18X1007.zip from ASUS. BIOS 1005 contains some fixes for system stability.

## CRASH CITY

**Q** Encouraged by your magazine I have started to totally upgrade my computer. The first things I bought was the P-4 2.4C and an ABIT IC7 motherboard. I have installed my old hardware with these new components: Albatron Geforce4 MX440; 300w PSU; Hercules Fortissimo2; WinXP Pro. But, I have encountered problems: random restarting (during games), sometimes will get a CPU error message during boot after installing and the modem disconnecting while using internet. I have a current system temp of 55 and the CPU fan speed is around 2,800RPM. All these hardware components were stable and fine with my Celeron 1.7GHz and ECS P4S54A.

Dan

**A** You had a P4S5A? SiS chipset? If you didn't uninstall the old chipset drivers before rebooting on the ABIT board, the Intel drivers may have been clobbered as soon as you installed them. However, WinXP should've smoothly installed some its native drivers and any Intel chipset driver installation

should've also been smooth. Remove the IDE controllers via Device Manager and try reinstalling the latest Intel driver set. Apart from excess heat, and the CPU temp may well be higher than the system temp of 55 degrees, I can't think of much else in so few words. But you should ALWAYS do a full reformat and reinstall of Windows if you're switching to a new mobo chipset.

## BUDGET UPGRADE

**Q** I want to upgrade. I don't want to spend much and I was looking at an MSI KT2 Combo and the Duron 1600. The motherboard has SDRAM and DDR slots so I can buy the board and CPU first then save some more money to get the DDR later. I have an ABIT ST6 and a 1GHz Celeron at 1.33GHz with a GeForce FX5200 and want to know how much faster this upgrade would be?

Luke

**A** The KT2 Combo does not and probably will never support a 333MHz FSB let alone a 400MHz CPU and there is obviously no headroom except for faster Durons. The best you can do with this







speed (64KB/s max and 50-55KB/s real world) is sufficiently fast as to be surprisingly ample and is worth the extra \$20. Sadly a 1.5Mbps connection, although available in Australia, is for filthy rich.

## SIDEBAND WOES

**Q** Hello I have a gigabyte 7ZXE mobo and an XP1800+ Palomino with an XMicro GeForce FX5600. My problem is that it has sideband addressing on and I want to turn it off though I don't know how, do you have any suggestions.

Christopher Teys

board is a 266MHz FSB DKV3C Athlon XP2600+. I think that this CPU is now impossible to source in Australia so your upgrade options are more limiting by the day. On the other hand, your ST6 features the Intel 815EP B-Step (ICH2) chipset, meaning that you can pop a quicker Celeron into the socket. BIOS version 9P will support the 1.4GHz Tualatin Celeron. The only downside to the ST6 is the lack of DDR support. A gig of PC133 is like an apple a day but dual channel DDR400 is creamy.

## PHAT PIPES

**Q** I'm considering getting a broadband connection. Can you tell me which ISP's have good pings? Also, can you tell me if a 512/128 connection is worth an additional \$20 because I don't want to spend too much on an internet connection.

Shane Cheung

**A** Wanna be a Low Ping Bastard? One word - Whirlpool. As in [www.whirlpool.net.au/](http://www.whirlpool.net.au/) I suppose I'm a power user of the Internet and we have anywhere from five to eight PCs connected to the home LAN playing on-line, emailing and surfing, and up to a dozen PCs on HuGE Saturday nights. I don't download music or warez but my 3GB allowance sees out the month without undue worry. If you're going to frag online, download MP3s and download large .ISO files then you'll need at least 10GB per month. A 512Kbps download

**A** Sideband is on? The latest NVIDIA reference drivers turn off Sidebanding and Fast Writes by default. Most video card manufacturers are also disabling the features in the video card BIOS. Why? Because the potential gain in performance of using them pales in comparison to the problems and instability they can cause. Furthermore, because of demanding timings, these two features can prevent the overclocking of the video card. The SBA bus is much more timing sensitive and thus, prone to failure when overclocked more than a little. On the other hand Sidebanding lets the graphics processor line up new data requests as the main bus continues to gather data. This increases the AGP bandwidth and speeds up data transfers. To check whether Fast Writes and Sideband Addressing are supported and/or enabled, use WCPUID by H.Oda! from [www.h-oda.com](http://www.h-oda.com) Even if your card supports AGP Sidebanding, there's no guarantee that you can disable it. It depends on whether the card manufacturer has provided the ability to do so. Usually, it's through a BIOS patch or an option in the software driver. More often than not, the BIOS or software driver SBA option is, strangely enough, "Disable AGP Support". You can also check if the option is available in the dxdiag.exe utility on the Display tab. Powerstrip (Google is your friend) can disable SBA as well.

## AMD FAN

**Q** I'm planning to upgrade my CPU and motherboard to another AMD CPU. My current machine is a custom rig with a Thunderbird 1.4GHz, A7M266, 1 Gig of 266MHz RAM and an Albatron GeForce4 Ti 4800 SE. I have narrowed my choice down to a Barton XP2800+ or Thoroughbred-B XP2600+. As far as motherboards go I have no idea as to which to one to choose, so I hope that you can recommend a solid performing board to go with the CPU. As I only use my machine for gaming your advice would be most appreciated.

Kiwi68 :-)

motherboard (the Torana engine in the Ferrari syndrome). Some just want to up-gun their CPU and RAM on their old BX motherboard (the 'Ma and Pa Kettle' syndrome). Real gamers forgo food and shelter to upgrade. Real gamers warm themselves in winter by hugging their paint blistering LAN box and cool themselves in summer with a 10-unit fan-farm. But I digress... The only difference between the two CPUs is Level 2 cache and price. Even though they are not 400MHz FSB puppies I recommend a dual 333/400MHz capable board for more upgrade headroom later on. You'll have to decide between a VIA based board or nForce2. Pick your price point and look for included features which are based on the vendor's choice of chipset - not all chipset features are implemented on all boards. Take a look at the GA-7N400 Pro 2 for starters.

**A** Answering a question about an upgrade depends on how it's asked. Some people want to keep their PC100 memory and 250MB Samsung hard-drive for their rip snorting five hundred dollar

## DADDY, WHERE DID MY GIGABYTES GO?



hard-drive but the computer will only read it as a 32GB even after the BIOS upgrade.

John

**Q** I'm hoping that you can help me with what I think is a BIOS problem. I have a P-III 450 on a GA-6BXC. I've downloaded the latest BIOS (6bxcf4) but the computer keeps saying it's incompatible or something like that. I then downloaded the version previous to that (F3) which worked fine. The problem I have is that I've installed an 80GB

**A** As I outlined in a recent DeCrypt, capacity barriers have been a fact of the PC world since its beginnings in the early 1980's. At least 15 different capacity barriers have occurred in the storage industry over the last 20 years. The most notable barriers seen previously have been at 528 MB, 8.4 GB and then 32GB. All this doesn't help right now and you want to flash so you can access a 80GB hard-drive. The link I checked says that it's a beta BIOS. It may also mean that it's not suitable for your PCB Revision hence the problem. The file you need is bios\_6bxc\_f4c.exe. Try again and make sure that your syntax is correct for the flash. (John contacted me later to say that a further flash with the correct BIOS worked).

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# THE PCPP INTERVIEW

PC Audio is an area of our games that is often overlooked, yet it's immediately obvious if it's not up to scratch. This month **Bennett Ring** had a chinwag with somebody who knows a little more about gaming audio than your average geek, George Thorn, the Director of Worldwide Developer Relations at Creative Labs.

## Curriculum Vitae

Name: **George Thorn**  
 Title: **Director of Worldwide Developer Relations**  
 Company: **Creative Labs**  
 Location: **Milpitas, California**  
 Projects: **Everything!**

Can you please give us a little background on what you do at Creative, and how you ended up in this position?

I joined Creative in 1995, and was originally based in the UK. They hired me to set up a European Developer Relations team to work with games developers over there, partly because of my previous experience working for Roland UK, where I ran the PC Music division for a while. Two years later I transferred to Creative's US office in California, where I now oversee developer relations activities worldwide, as well as being responsible for audio marketing strategies for all our desktop based audio products.

Creative has dominated the sound card market for years now - how? Compared to the highly advanced technology in use in other components, it would seem that sound cards are relatively simple, which we thought would lead to more competitors in this market segment? I think it's relatively easy to do "OK" audio on the PC these days, and in a way, that's our biggest competitive threat. "OK" audio is cheap to deliver, but it's not good enough for Creative. Delivering high quality audio, solid, stable drivers and compelling features is much harder to do. For the longest time we have focused hard on delivering incredible value for money products which constantly raise the bar in terms of features and quality. That attention to our core business has served to keep our brands healthy and strong, especially "Soundblaster" and "EAX". This makes it hard for people to come into this space and establish competitive brands to ours.

Sound card technology seems to be advancing at a much slower pace than the other components within the PC? Why is this? Are sound cards already at a point where there isn't much technological innovation left to implement?

Well it's true that there was a huge burst of activity starting around 1998, when PCI opened up opportunities for 3D audio, and the first efforts to provide real time, in-game effects processing were made around the same time. Arguably things have slowed somewhat since. But there's a lot more we intend to do to push the audio experience even further along. More dedicated DSP for effects processing, more simultaneous 3D hardware voices, and improved software for managing audio experiences on the PC are just a few of

**our challenge is to educate people that 'ok' audio isn't good enough**

the goals we're aiming for. This, combined with the very real onset of the long-awaited digital media convergence, gives us plenty of scope to innovate, not just in our core gaming market, but in home theatre/distributed digital media markets too.

We're somewhat dependent on the PC architecture to provide us with opportunities to add value with audio, and recent developments like USB 2.0 and the upcoming PCI Express are providing us with new ways to innovate, so I think you can expect to see the pace pick up again in audio for the PC. Still, when compared to the developments in CPU technology for example, it's true that audio doesn't follow the same pace of innovation. That's a function of R&D investment based on returns - the CPU business is much bigger than the audio business!

What improvements in sound card technology do you see hitting the PC in the next couple of years? I expect to see external audio devices

that can perform equally well as either audio accelerators for PC games or as home theatre receivers. I expect to see advances in online multiplayer game audio and voice / video chat in general. I also think that on a more general level, PC sound will continue to increase in importance, based on the emerging role of the PC as the digital media hub in the home. I'm also hoping we'll get to EAX 6.0 in that timeframe, but we'll have to see.

What is the latest version of EAX, and how does this differ from prior versions? What does EAX Advanced HD offer that prior versions of EAX didn't?

We introduced EAX ADVANCED HD with the new Audigy soundcard generations. These all support EAX 3.0 and EAX 4.0, which is the latest version of the EAX API. EAX ADVANCED HD describes a new level of realtime signal processing not possible on our previous Soundblaster products such as the Soundblaster Live! With EAX 4.0 we are tapping into the full potential of the Audigy DSP, allowing developers to render and control up to three simultaneous environments positioned in 3D space. Also new for EAX 4.0, we've provided access to our other hardware based effects, such as delay, distortion and pitch shifting, so that developers can use these effects in combination with the environment effects.

In the past EAX has sometimes had a massive performance hit when enabled. For example, UT2K3 frame rates plummet by upwards of 35% when EAX is enabled - why is this? Bad coding on the part of the game developers? What should be the maximum performance hit when EAX is enabled?

No I'm not going to lay the blame on developers, although part of the challenge in implementing 3D audio in a game is knowing what not to do when writing to audio hardware! Actually, developers were very instrumental in

helping us identify some aspects of EAX 3.0 that were causing system slow downs, due to the way our soundcard driver was processing the calls. We have since been able to optimize the drivers such that, in combination with good programming practises, any drastic slowdowns have all but disappeared.

With the latest Audigy drivers, I would expect users to be able to enable full EAX ADVANCED HD processing (including EAX 4.0) and lose no more than 15% framerate in games using 3D audio. This is a relatively small price to pay for a much superior audio experience, when compared to 2 channel stereo running on an AC97 codec with no real time effects.

While the idea of 7.1 speaker systems is great in theory, placing 7 speakers around your PC is a usually messy and cluttered affair. For this reason we at PCPP still see that 5.1 setups aren't that common. How can this be solved? Creative have an excellent speaker stand for 5.1 systems - anything in the works for 6.1 and 7.1 speaker systems?

It's true - but it's so much fun when you finally have it all set up! It's hard to go back to even 5.1 once you've played a few games over a 7.1 system. This is because, unlike DVD movies, we do actually position 3D game sounds discretely over all 7 channels, based on the xyz coordinates of the in-game sounds. So, when a sound goes behind you and to your left in a game, it really does! As for the speaker stand, I'm not sure if we have new versions coming, but it seems like a good idea!

A speaker above and below the player seem the next logical step in surround sound - are Creative working on this and what challenges does this present?

I agree it would seem logical, but the logistical challenges that you point out today with setting up 6.1 and 7.1 systems are a long way from being overcome. First, I expect to see some increased effort put into rendering convincing elevation effects over existing multi-channel speaker arrays. That's another area where we need more DSP processing power than we have available to us on today's soundcards.

The PC is now becoming popular as a media center - how do you feel PC sound hardware compares to dedicated home theatre equipment, in regards to both price and performance?

The PC has the potential to be a superior



device all round - high resolution graphics, advanced multi-channel audio, and if you think about it, much more flexible media mixing capabilities. If you have ever tried to integrate a media PC with existing CE devices then you will understand the challenges involved. I think Microsoft is doing a great job with its XP Media Center Edition in terms of integrating the key home theatre experiences and expanding the potential via the Internet for downloadable media, media on demand, etc. All of this is good for Creative, in terms of stimulating a need for richer, more powerful audio components, and we will certainly play our part in making the cost comparison to traditional consumer products look good for us.

**Onboard sound has rapidly evolved over the last couple of years, with motherboards now offering full surround sound and optical in/out. How do these onboard solutions compare to Creative's standalone soundcards?**  
They offer "OK" sound, average drivers/performance, and limited software support, if any. They can't support EAX ADVANCED HD, and often don't support EAX 1.0 or 2.0. When they do they rely on the host to render the effects, with cheap algorithms that sound so poor that users often disable them. This is what happens when cost becomes the key focus. There's no innovation there. It seems NVIDIA is

also moving in this direction, with their recent decision to drop hardware support of audio in their nForce chipsets rather than a standard feature going forward. All that said, our challenge is to educate people that "OK" audio isn't good enough, and that it's worth paying a little more to get "great" audio. A related challenge is making it easy for consumers to upgrade to "great" audio, and that's where external audio devices like the Audigy 2 NX are becoming increasingly important for Creative.

**What is Creative doing about its driver support, which seems rather messy at the moment. For example, to install the Audigy 2, the user must have the original driver disk - you can't simply download these off the Net if you've lost the disk. Likewise with the Live! cards - the download page for these drivers is a little confusing.**

Totally agree. We're going to release a stand-alone audio pack which will have drivers plus a control panel for accessing the key functionality such as speaker selection, decoder options, etc. This pack

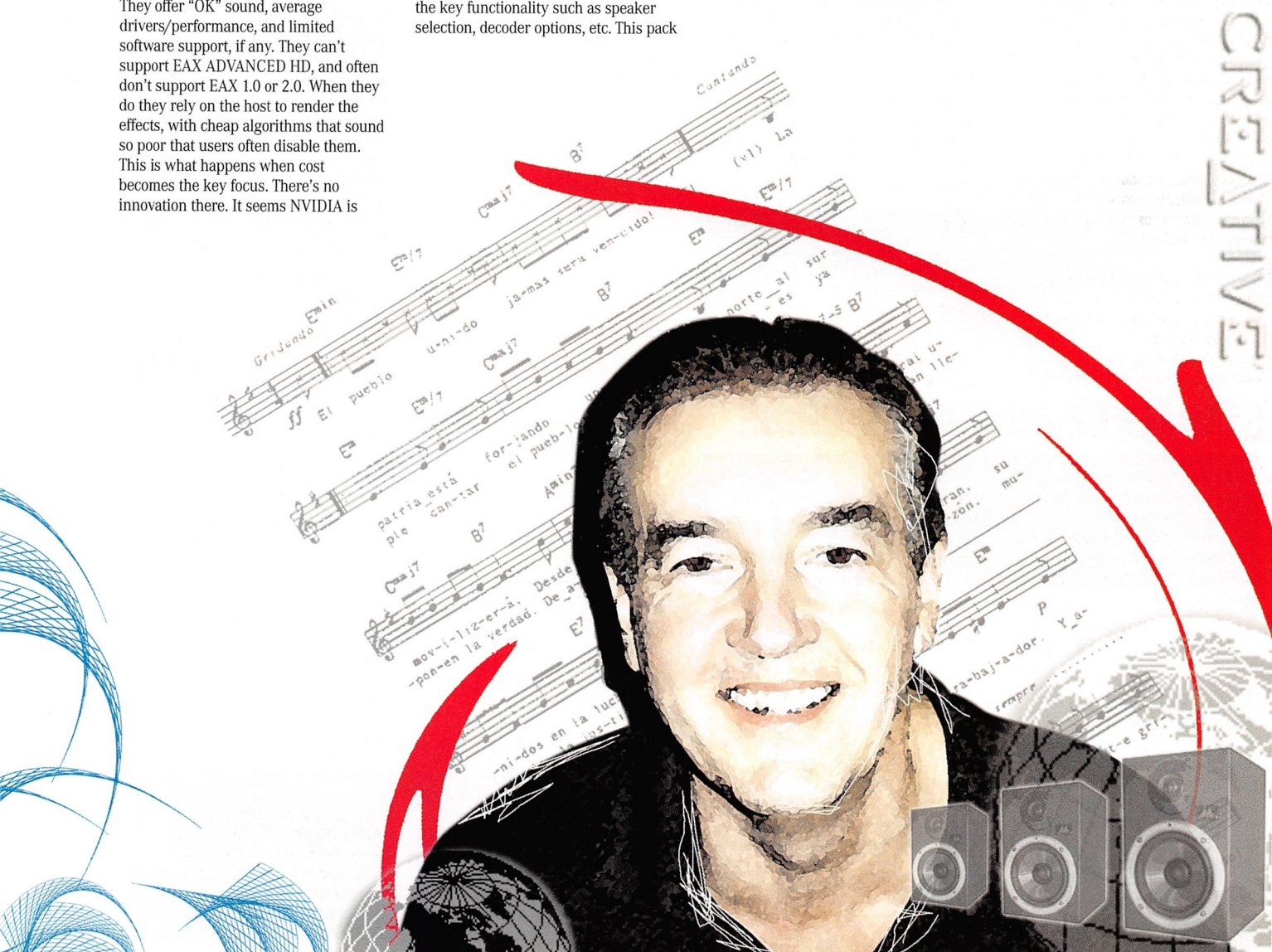
is in development right now. We're currently discussing the layout of the control panel UI. I hope we'll have it available on the web in the very near future, but it will first have to go through extensive internal testing, so I can't give you an exact date. Bottom line, we can't expect users to always have their original CD available and we need to have a better solution for our customers.

**How closely does EAX work with game developers when implementing EAX in a title? Is it a simple matter for a game developer to implement EAX?**  
Later versions of EAX are more complex to implement because they offer more features. Developers that have programmed for EAX in the past don't have much trouble with new versions, although EAX 4.0 is something of a leap forward from previous versions. We have developed some helper applications and sound design tools to make the process easier. For really exciting titles, and where we have the opportunity to do so, we'll help with the

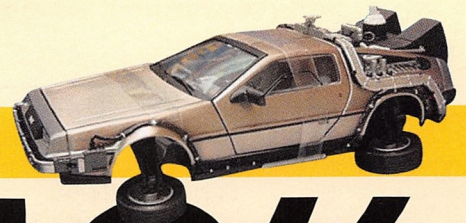
implementation and sound design ourselves. In general, EAX is a well known and well documented API that games developers have been working with for over 5 years, so we're very pleased to see the momentum it has in the industry.

**Please add anything else about soundcards/Creative that you feel would be of interest to PC gamers.**

Well I'd like to say a big "thanks" to all those gamers who have chosen to use one of our products as part of their system. I'd also like to take the opportunity to tell people that if they are using one of our older cards such as the SB Live! they really should try to upgrade to one of the new Audigy 2s. The new cards do really make games sound so much better, and with an Audigy 2 you'll be hearing the game audio the way developers do, since the Audigy 2 is the reference platform that all games developers use when creating and implementing the audio for their titles.







# FLASHBACK

Games and tech remembered with Anthony Fordham

## CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN

**Developer:** Muse  
**Genre:** Nazi-bustin' action  
**Graphics Mode:** CGA  
**Sound:** PC speaker  
**True 3D:** Hell no  
**Operating System:** DOS  
**Released:** 1984

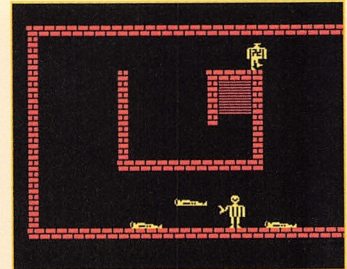
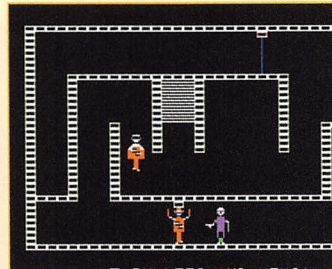
I bet you thought id Software's pseudo-3D classic was the first time Wolfenstein had ever been escaped from by early PC users with too much time on their hands, huh? Well guess what, 11 years before those blue stone walls swung sickeningly around your head and gave a generation of gamers motion sickness, Muse Software busted out a Nazi-crushing classic for the Apple II called Castle Wolfenstein.

A PC port was quick to follow. Well, more or less. It arrived in 1984 and made the best use of four-colour CGA graphics. At first glance the game was

a forced-perspective dungeon crawl with a WW2 theme. A plucky GI had to infiltrate a Nazi POW castle, steal a bunch of secret battle plans and hopefully take down as many guards as possible on the way out.

Without graphics to carry the game, Wolfenstein was all about gameplay. It was the original stealth-em-up and everything from Thief to Deus Ex (Some range, both those games are from the same designer - Ed) owes it a debt of mechanics.

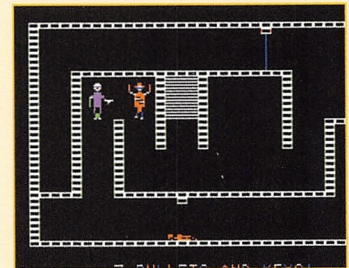
Other neat concepts included being able to interrogate guards at gunpoint and wear enemy uniforms to confuse



lax captors and sneak through heavily populated rooms. Like Thief, you couldn't just run amok killing whoever you liked, because if guards came across too many dead bodies, they'd yell for the SS and you'd better hope you were packing some extra grenades.

Wolfenstein's real victory was to realise that combining gaming with Nazis was a sure-fire express ticket to success. Gamers, it seems, just love shooting Nazis, sneaking around Nazis, grenading Nazis and generally making a fool of Hitler's finest.

Unfortunately, once Wolfenstein 3D hit our floppy drives and catapulted id Software toward Doom (which subsequently catapulted them to stupidly high tax bills), everyone seemed to forget Castle Wolfenstein. Which was a shame because, graphics aside, it was actually the better game.



### WHY CASTLE WOLFENSTEIN DESERVES TO BE REMEMBERED

- First stealth-em-up
- Packed with innovative and fresh concepts
- Introduced a generation to the pleasures of Nazi-busting
- Was actually superior to id Software's Wolfenstein 3D

## FLASHBACK TECH

### STARBLADE ARCADE MACHINE

**Manufacturer:** Namco  
**Significance:** Eleven years before Xbox's famous hard drive, Starblade was using a laserdisc to eliminate load times, as well as basic force-feedback.  
**Cost:** \$1 a game  
**Released:** 1991



Something a little different for Flashback Tech this month. Starblade was a big, hulking arcade machine that usually slumped up the back of cinemas and Timezones with all the unpopular stuff like mechanical Whack-a-Rat.

Starblade was a fairly typical on-rails shooter in which the player used kind of an electronic water cannon to wave a cursor around the massive screen shooting at endless waves of un-textured polygonal enemies in a quest to destroy the evil planet Red Eye.

So what, you may think, why should we care? Well, Starblade had a

couple of interesting features that are now considered de-rigueur for any decent gaming platform, be it console or PC.

For a start, there was the force feedback. The game had 'rattlers' in the chair to give you a bit of a jolt whenever your doughty GeoSword fighter took a hit, and additional strobe lights in the corners of the booth to create a sense of confusion in heavy fire-fights.

Most interestingly though, the cabinet spooled geometric data from a laserdisc built into the base of the seat,

allowing for huge battles full of dozens of capital ships, but sparing Namco the fabulous cost of megabytes of RAM and ROM, which back in 1991 were fabulously expensive.

What's more, the laserdisc could spool data into the game on the fly, so there were no loading times whatsoever - the player moved seamlessly from orbital fleet engagement to asteroid strike to the enemy home world. Halo fans would have found the experience familiar.

One technical 'innovation' Namco used on Starblade has thankfully not made it to any PC or console gaming accessory - this was to

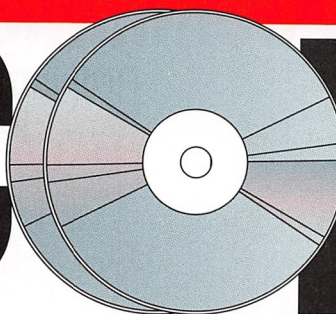
project the action of the game onto a 27 inch concave mirror, which was textured with hundreds of grooves like a carnival mirror to give a false sense of a 3D perspective. The practical upshot of this groovy little addition was to make most of the text in the game unreadable, and objects on the edge of the screen really hard to shoot at.

However, Starblade serves as an excellent example of the bold experimenting the arcade industry had to do to stay viable in an emerging world of consoles and powerful PCs. Nowadays of course, they're going crazy. Trout Master 3D, anyone?





# THE DISC



## REQUESTS

We welcome requests so please forward your requests to Disc Producer Amos Hong via email at [cdgod@next.com.au](mailto:cdgod@next.com.au) or write to PCPP DVD Requests, 78 Renwick St, Redfern NSW 2016



**H**appy New Year!!! As we farewell 2003, I'm filled with excitement at what 2004 will bring. With huge games like Half-Life 2 and Doom 3 scheduled for release, I believe that it will be a great year for gamers. To help welcome in the New Year, I have tried my best to put together a nice collection of demos, mods, movies and patches.

As a special surprise, this month we have for every PC Powerplay a FREE copy of the original Age of Empires. Now everyone can try out the game that spawned the hugely successful series.

In this month's Spotlight, We have included the second demo for the hugely popular Call of Duty will have you dodging bullets and tanks as you try to secure the town, you captured in the first demo. As we have so many great movies this month, I've had to leave out the latest instalment of Anachronox, but don't worry because it will be included next month. In the meantime check out the Deus Ex, Driver 3 and Alias trailers.

The Demos section, this month includes a nice collection of nine demos. With an intriguing storyline,

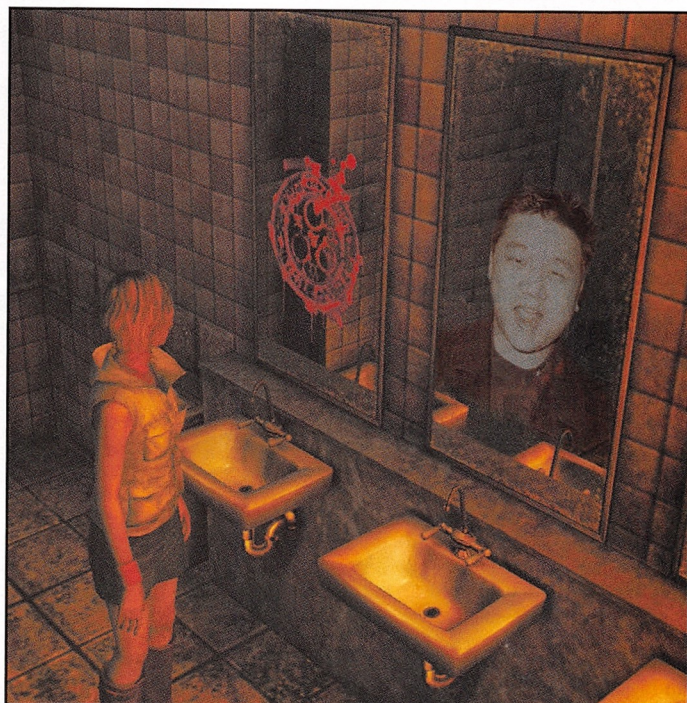
breath-taking graphics and Bullet Time, the Max Payne 2 demo will blow your mind. The Silent Hill 3 demo will have you sleeping with your lights on for a very long time, it's that scary. Other demos include the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Need for Speed: Underground and Beyond Good & Evil.

Mods Plus this month brings you the latest in the Desert Combat series, version .5J. With tons of additions and fixes, this mod will keep you occupied till the next release. The Mods Plus section also has three different Half-Life mods that will have you playing the classic game for a while longer (or at least till Half-Life 2 is released).

And as always, the Bunker has heaps of wallpapers, screensavers, maps and free games. Check out the photo of ROM, he has finally revealed his true identity. The Patches section has seven different patches. This month, fix bugs in games like Max Payne 2, Chrome and Hidden & Dangerous 2.

Till the next issue!!

Amos Hong - Disc Master  
[cdgod@next.com.au](mailto:cdgod@next.com.au)



## DVD CONTENTS



**SPOTLIGHT/ MOVIES**  
Call of Duty "Dawnville"

### TRAILERS

Alias  
Call of Duty  
Deus Ex: Invisible War  
Driver 3  
Leisure Suit Larry Magna Cum Laude  
S.T.A.L.K.E.R.: Oblivion Lost

### DEMOS

Need for Speed: Underground  
Pro Evolution Soccer 3  
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles  
Championship Manager 03/04  
NASCAR Thunder 2004  
Uru: Ages Beyond MYST  
Max Payne 2  
Silent Hill 3  
TrackMania

### MODS PLUS

Multi Theft Auto: VC v0.2.2  
[GTA:VC]  
Action Half-Life v1.0 [HL]  
Desert Combat v.5L [BF:1942]

FireArms v2.8 [HL]  
Project Timeless v1.0 Beta [HL]  
Plus Modlife  
Red Orchestra [UT 2003]

### PATCHES

Contract J.A.C.K. v1.0 - 1.1  
Hidden & Dangerous 2 v1.02  
Max Payne 2 v1.01  
The Temple of Elemental Evil v1.0  
Battlefield: 1942 v1.5  
Chrome v1.1.1.0  
C&C Generals v1.07



### ROM'S BUNKER

Heaps more wallpaper, free games, Winamp skins, map packs and addon files for all your favourite games. Come get some!

### UTILITIES

Abandon Loader - f  
Adaptec ASPI Layer 4.71.2 - f  
Adobe Acrobat Reader 6.0 - f  
Advanced Zip Repair 1.6 - s



AutoDivX Player 3.6 - f  
Burn4Free 1.0 - f  
Catalyst Radeon Display Driver 3.9.7.95 - f



Complete Online Gaming System-f  
DivX Video 5.1 - f  
DirectX 9.0b - f  
Download Accelerator 5.3 - a  
GetRight 5.02 - f  
G Spot 2.21 - f  
HyperSnap-DX 5.3 - s  
IsoBuster 1.4 - f  
KaZaa Media Desktop 2.5.2 - f  
LEET Speak 1.2 - f  
nVIDIA ForceWare drivers 52.16 - f  
Ostat v0.31 (build 240 rel 4) - f  
PC-cillin 2003 - d  
PowerPoint Viewer 97 8.0 - f  
SANDRA Plus 2004 - s  
S-Spline Pro 1.091 - s  
Stuffit 7.0 - f  
VDM Sound 2.0.4 - f  
VIA Hyperion 4-in-1 4.47 - f  
Windows Media Player 9 [w/PowerToys] - f  
Windows Movie Maker 2 - f  
WinRAR 3.2 - s  
Winzip 8.1 - s  
Zip Repair 1.0 - f  
ZoneAlarm 3.7.202 - f

## CD CONTENTS

**CD 1  
FREE GAME**  
Age of Empires

**CD 2  
DEMOS**  
Call of Duty "Dawnville"  
Championship Manager 03/04  
Dungeon Scroll  
Mine Field Runner  
Need For Speed: Underground  
Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles  
Uru: Ages Beyond MYST



**FREE GAMES**  
Alex the Allegator 4  
Bounty Hunter SX  
Caveship  
Dink Smallwood  
Elf Bowling 3  
Ghost Hunter  
Horrorween  
Icy Tower  
Pakoon 2  
Sideswipe





# Sim Committee Agenda Mana

Proving that with enough bureaucracy, just ordering lunch is impossible



"I'd like to table a motion to form a committee to determine entree options," says Grainger Meltdown, lead developer of 'exciting' new PC gaming start up Red Tape. We're sitting in Sydney's exclusive weirdly-designed Calrose restaurant, build out on a finger-thin pontoon jutting into the harbour, and eschewing regular tables for one long bench so you're forced to talk with fellow diners. Not that there's much danger of that today - the four of us are the only ones in the restaurant.

Calrose serves Indian food without conventional utensils, so you have to use your fingers for everything, the curry, everything. So choosing entrees is indeed something that needs everyone's input. It can get complicated. But surely, I think, not this complicated.

"If you'd care to examine the agenda," lead artist Hayman Islet says, waving a menu, "we first need to draw up a six point action plan for potential drinks order development. We need a decision on this, quickly."

"Hold your horses there Hayman," says QA manager Uliak O'McFitzwilliamson. "Before we can even address the drinks issue, I really think we need to clear up the matter of the seating. The seating was not actioned correctly according to the seating policy we drew up in the cab ride over. For instance, I should be sitting next to Grainger."

I pull heavily from the Crown Lager I ordered for myself ten minutes ago.

"I thought we'd voted on a motion to dismiss the original seating plan for an ad hoc seating policy?" asks Grainger. "Anyway, I wanted to sit next to the journalist, I should be sitting next to the journalist because I'm the lead developer and he'll want to ask me the most questions about the game."

"But before we can address the interview," says Hayman, heavily emphasising the words 'address' and 'interview', "we need to action a drinks plan!"

"Entrees!" insists Grainger.

"Seating!" demands Uliak.

"Damn it!" I scream, "I've eaten here before, let me order for everyone if it's so difficult!" The waitresses look up from trying to stop their trendy bamboo aprons from digging savagely into their soft nubile midriffs to see what all the shouting is about. When they spot a journalist standing over a table full of suits aggressively waving a bottle of beer, they dismiss it as perfectly normal.

The members of Red Tape sit back with considered expressions on their faces.

"Order for us huh? Interesting motion," says Hayman.

"Was it a motion?" snaps Uliak.

"Who'll second it though?" asks Grainger, "someone has to second it or else how can we vote on it?"

There was a pause.

"Alright I'll second it then," says Grainger.

"You can't second it, you called for it to be seconded! How can you second it if you're



chairing? And while we're at it," Uliak raises a finger, "who elected you chair anyway? I thought this was a chairless meeting?"

"What a stupid concept!" splutters Hayman.

I sit down, defeated, and flip through a press pack of Red Tape's new game Committee Manager 2004. Apparently, according to the rather garbled blurb, the player takes control of a committee and has to get it to vote on something. What the something is isn't important, getting the committee to vote on it, on anything, is the challenge. It doesn't even have to be a successful vote. In fact, you can even get points for somehow manipulating the committee into a position where it's in agreement to start discussing the possibility of tabling a motion for a vote. If you can get the motion seconded, you can put your name in the Hall of Fame. Or at least, nominate your name for tabling before a Hall of Fame sub-committee for a motion to be voted into the Hall of Fame, or at least to go before the Hall of Fame selection committee. I close the press kit and call for another crownie and a single serve of Chicken Tikka.

Meanwhile, Red Tape is locked deep in discussion. "Our constitution clearly states," begins Grainger, producing a heavy ring-bound document from somewhere inside his jacket, "that in a situation where a motion is tabled before a chair selection committee can be assembled, then the president of the company shall by default become the chair for that motion, and that motion only. A chair pro tem, as it were."

"But you're not the company president," Uliak points out. Hayman sighs and flops back in his chair - except that he's forgotten he's at Calrose and is in fact sitting on a long bench. Waitresses hurry to help him up off the floor. The

rest of Red Tape ignores his flailing limbs.

"Yes but our constitution states that if our company president is absent or, in the case of Mr Manhattan-Project," Grainger takes a breath, "dead, then the chair pro tem position automatically defaults to the next most senior committee member. And that would be me."

"But we haven't even convened the committee to discuss the motion of having this journalist here order lunch for us!" screams Uliak. "How do we know who the next most senior member of the committee is if the committee doesn't even exist yet?"

"We vote on it!" Grainger cries in triumph. The assembled members of Red Tape nod sagely.

"Alright," says Hayman, after dusting his suit free of the trendy shaved sawdust that covers the floor, "so who shall we nominate to chair this vote?"

"Hey guys," I say quickly, licking my fingers clean of Chicken Tikka, "thanks for the lunch. I've got to run, you know, I've got a... uh... thing, to go to. A press thing. For the press."

They don't even hear me, they're right into the nomination process and they've all produced their resumes for the nomination sub-committee - Hayman - to examine before the nominations even get under way. The waitresses are starting to wilt so I deftly swipe the platinum Amex from Grainger's wallet where he's left it on the long table, and I hand it over to the maitre d' who is standing at his station just slowly shaking his head as Uliak stands to make an impassioned pre-nomination-speech speech.

"Just keep the drinks flowing," I say to him in a conspiratorial tone, "If you're lucky they might manage to order some Naan by closing."

Incidentally, if you ever eat at Calrose don't have the Chicken Tikka. I'm not sure what the chef's special sauce is, but it sure ain't yoghurt.

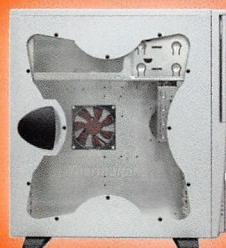




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